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CARDINAL EDITION

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"OCEAN'S 11"

You wouldn't call it a gang, just Danny Ocean and his eleven pals—the night they blew all the fuses in Las Vegas!

starring
FRANK
SINATRA
DEAN
MARTIN
SAMMY
DAVIS, JR.
PETER
LAWFORD
ANGIE
DICKINSON

A novelization of the hilarious movie by
GEORGE CLAYTON JOHNSON
and JACK GOLDEN RUSSELL

Screenplay by Harry Brown
Directed by Lewis Milestone
A Dorchester Production
in Technicolor® Panavision
released through Warner Bros.

ORIGINAL NOVEL
NOT A REPRINT

Pep Talk Before the Kickoff!

"Okay, guys," Danny said, "here's the whole layout. You know what this map is, don't you?"

"Sure," Curly said. "It's printed right up there in the corner—Las Vegas, Nevada."

Ocean nodded. "Yeah. Now this map of the city's got everything we're interested in spotted real plain—especially the casinos."

His finger stabbed at the paper. "These are the five we'll hit—the Sahara, the Riviera, Desert Inn, the Sands, the Flamingo."

He looked around the table slowly. "We figure to liberate about two million in each of them."

There was a shuddery inhalation.
Somebody muttered: "Ten million bucks!"
The voice was freighted with awe.

THE BIGGEST HEIST
IN HISTORY!

Ten million bucks suddenly disappears from the five richest gambling casinos in Las Vegas as every light in town goes out. The cops are helpless. There are no suspects, no trace of the loot.

Who was the criminal genius who masterminded this coup? Frank Sinatra, that's who, as Danny Ocean, leader of Ocean's Eleven, ably assisted by Dean Martin, Peter Lawford, Sammy Davis, Jr., and Richard Conte, Cesar Romero, Joey Bishop, Akim Tamiroff, Henry Silva, Red Skelton and George Raft.

The cast includes Angie Dickinson, as Danny's wife, and Patrice Wymore, as Adele Ekstrom.

Directed by Lewis Milestone.

OCEAN'S ELEVEN is an original CARDINAL edition.

OCEAN'S ELEVEN

STORY BY
George Clayton Johnson and Jack Golden Russell

SCREENPLAY BY
Harry Brown

POCKET BOOKS, INC. • NEW YORK

OCEAN'S ELEVEN

CARDINAL edition published August, 1960
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"OCEAN'S
11"

CHAPTER ONE...

1

Spyros Acebos lay in a padded reclining chair, sweltering and suffering. Outside Drucker's Barbershop on Wilshire Boulevard were all the gay trappings, the carnival clinquant, of a Hollywood Christmas season, the feverish pulse of a people caught up in the annual buying hysteria, but none of the holiday camaraderie and certainly no gaiety infected Spyros Acebos.

The towel that swathed his face was too hot. The barber's patting touch was too rough. The new alligator shoes were too tight. His belt reproached him again for not letting the doctors at Leavenworth remove his gall bladder, on the house. But most of all there were Danny Ocean and Jimmy Foster.

Or, rather, where in hell were they?

"A mistake," Acebos murmured into the steamy toweling. "Of all the mistakes you have made in your life, Spyros, my friend, this was the worst, sending those two off together. One by himself he is enough to create chaos. The two together—God have mercy on the women of Phoenix, Arizona, and Spyros Acebos."

He sighed, his pudgy body shuddering. He was an accomplished sigher, long practiced. All his fifty-odd years Spyros Acebos had sighed, groaned, asked Heaven why he should be so persecuted by ill fortune, but only once had his lamentations resounded off prison walls and that had been during service of a mere three-to-five for income-tax evasion.

Income-tax evasion! The Blind Goddess could have echoed the bedraggled Santa Claus at the corner outside and his bitter "Ho, ho, ho!"

Spyros dragged himself out of his misery enough to hear the barbershop door open and to identify the shuffling footsteps that crossed the floor to the shelf in front of his chair. He heard the clink of bottle stoppers, caught a whiff of Eau de Lilac through the nose opening in the towel, and sighed again. With the whole world teetering on the brink of utter catastrophe, Mushy O'Conners was chiseling hair tonic.

Acebos' voice was muffled but despairing. "Mushy," he said, "I told you."

"It's okay, Mr. Acebos," the barber murmured.

“It is not okay,” Spyros said firmly. “He will stench up my car if he is not deterred. With his flat nose, he needs a quart of perfume to even get through to him.”

There was the clatter of a bottle being replaced on the glass counter and an apologetic voice rasped: “Just a dab, boss. Just tryin’ it for smell. I went lookin’ for you at the house.” A pause. “You wasn’t there.”

“Did you look real hard?” Spyros asked acidly.

“Well, yeah. I mean, when that Lin guy, the Chink, said you wasn’t there I figured you’d prob’ly be here. Besides, Lin said you was havin’ your phone calls switched to here.”

“What then?” the man under the towel asked. “I should stay cooped up all day waiting for their calls?”

“You ain’t heard from Danny yet, huh?” Mushy asked. “He ain’t called you back?”

Acebos reacted as though stung by a tarantula. He lurched in the chair and struggled to raise himself to a sitting position, tearing the towel from him. Revealed was a swarthy, pendulous face on which had been etched the indelibilities of a lifetime of illicit enterprise. Despite his profession’s need for secrecy, Acebos never had succeeded in hiding his inner self from the world’s most casual gaze: one glance told the beholder that here was a man constitutionally bedeviled, a man harried by a host of dark private aggravations, beleaguered by relentless woes and urgencies.

As his barber stooped for the towel, levered the chair back to upright, Spyros delivered his lament, his Greek accent sharpening. “He has called me back? Danny Ocean call me back? Better you should expect the sun to go down tomorrow in the east.”

The barber snipped his scissors experimentally beside Acebos’ left ear. “The usual off the sides?” he murmured.

“Cut off the complete head,” Spyros cried fiercely. “I never use it anyway, otherwise I’d never have even said hello the first time I met Danny Ocean.”

“Look, boss, you don’t mean that,” Mushy O’Conners protested. “Maybe he ain’t so good at callin’ back on the phone when he ought to, but there’s nobody like Danny when the goin’ gets rough. Nobody.”

Acebos glared at his stooge-bodyguard. He saw a battered man in his late thirties who had been on the wrong end of too many Everlast gloves. Mushy once had been described by a sports writer as “The Scar Tissue That Walks Like a Man,” but everybody admitted that once you got past that scar tissue, the broken nose, the bulbous ears, the Neanderthalic bone structure, you could find a nice face on

O'Conners. Tough but nice, as in the ads for whatever it is that the tough but oh, so gentle pug advertises.

At the moment Mushy almost let himself be torn between loyalties. He was Spyros Acebos' man: on Spyros Acebos depended his next meal of the day, his next pack of cigarettes, the dough wherewith to pursue life, happiness, and dolls. But to Danny Ocean he owed an allegiance that came dangerously close to love. Why, Danny was the guy who—Well, Mushy sure wished he was working for Danny Ocean instead of Mr. Acebos, that's all.

He met Acebos' glower bravely. "It's Jimmy Foster that's screwin' up the detail," he said. "Jimmy's a nice guy, real class, but—"

"Don't tell me who is who," Spyros broke in. "I guess I ought to know which one of those two monsters is ruining everything. I guess I —"

"Phoenix calling Mr. Acebos."

Spyros twisted in his chair, heedless of the hovering shears, as the colored attendant came down the line, a telephone in his hand, the extension cord trailing. Acebos reached far out over the side of the chair to seize the instrument as a shipwreck victim might grab a ring buoy.

"Hello, hello!" he cried wildly. "Danny-boy?"

"The other end, boss," Mushy suggested gently. "That's the end you listen over."

Acebos reversed the phone, still crying: "Danny?"

"This is Operator Niyunty-two. Mr. Acebos?"

"Yes, Operator. Speaking."

"On your call to Phoenix, Mr. Ocean doesn't answer. Shall I keep—"

"Mr. Ocean don't answer, huh?" The light of hope died in Spyros' eyes. "How about Mr. Foster?"

"Mr. Foster doesn't answer eyether. Neyether Mr. Ocean nor Mr. Foster answer. Shall I keep trying to reach them or would you prefer —"

"Listen, you page them, Operator, and keep paging them until you find them. If it takes all day, all week. If it takes all year, you find them."

He clashed the phone back into its cradle, handed it to Mushy, collapsed back in his chair. "That's all I needed at a time like this," he muttered. "A pair of funny men who can *stand* three days in Phoenix."

His dark, sorrow-laden eyes rolled upward toward the snip-snipping on top of his sparsely covered pate. "Get lost, John," he told his barber abruptly. "Go look for that special hair tonic you didn't think came in yet, please."

"Yes, Mr. Acebos," the barber said, and departed. He was accustomed to precipitate dismissals: more deals, legal and otherwise, had been consummated in this shop than in half the front offices of Hollywood.

Spyros Acebos drummed his thick fingers on the padded arms of the barber chair, his eyes brooding.

"More details to contend with than shooting to the moon," he murmured, "and they go tumbleweeding around with no more worries than did it rain last year. Steffens, Rheimer, Massler and that Bergdorf, and to get them in line I got to depend on a madman like Danny Ocean."

"He'll fix it," Mushy O'Conners said soothingly. "You wait and see. Old Danny can fix anything."

"He better fix this," Spyros Acebos said grimly, "or maybe he finds himself very dead. Anybody that lets this one blow don't figure to live and prosper long. Not even your wonderful Danny Ocean."

"Aw, boss, you don't mean that," Mushy said. But as he looked at Acebos, O'Conners knew that Spyros did mean it.

Yes, indeed.

2

Danny Ocean let himself into Suite 7-L of the motel on the outskirts of Phoenix and stopped at the threshold to fully appreciate the scene.

In his absence, Jimmy Foster had found two broads and the brunette sitting on the floor with the bongo drum between her knees was stacked like the proverbial small brick structure. Not that the other one, the blonde who was astride Jimmy's back on the couch, was the stringy spinster type. Her stern in its tight Capris was well constructed.

The record player and the bongo drum had buried the sound of Danny's entrance under a rhythmic clamor so the young man closed the door and leaned back against it while he studied the situation, trying to decide just what in hell the blonde was doing or was about to do to Jimmy. In broad daylight, yet, and did she prefer a bongo accompaniment?

He stood there, slim, dark, volatile, good-looking, clad in slacks, sweater, open-throated shirt, dirty buck shoes, all of which looked expensive and were. Danny Ocean had expensive tastes, in clothes, food, liquor, cars, hotel suites and women: financing these tastes required full employment of his agile mind. This had been going on for some time (he was thirty-seven) and there had been only one major foul-up in Danny's career: Bea.

Dear Bea, so soft, so neat, so cool, so molten when the late afternoon sun leaked through the drawn Venetian blinds to paint streaks across the bed, across her tumultuous sun-browned body. Dear Bea, so dear that even now he could not think of her without feeling the aching need for her and she so gone, so gone away.

Danny shook his head, concentrating on the jiggling globes encased in the Capris. He saw now that the blonde was massaging Jimmy Foster's neck and back and pretty expertly, too. Jimmy had stripped to the waist; he was lying face down on the couch and although the music and the hammering bongo drum drowned out everything else, Danny knew he was grunting, almost purring, in his pleasure. That guy and his massages: sometimes Danny thought Jimmy would rather be massaged than the other.

The phone on the table beside the couch shrilled and the brunette squatted on the floor stopped punishing the drum. The blonde straddling Foster reached out a hand toward the demanding phone. Jimmy roused himself out of his stroked-cat torpor in time to grasp her wrist just before the slim fingers picked up the instrument.

"Ah-ah, mustn't touch," he said lazily. He rolled over between her legs and smiled up at her.

"But, Jim-my, it keeps ringing," the blonde protested.

"It'll stop in time," Foster said. "They always do. I've made it a cardinal rule never to answer a telephone during the month of December, you see." His voice held a suggestion of a British accent, not definite enough to be phony, more the voice of a man who had gone to school in England as a boy.

The girl atop him stared down, her eyes round. "But that's crazy," she said at length. "Why don't you answer the telephone in December?"

"Because there was a time that whenever I answered the phone in December they made me take some little friends and go out into the snow," Foster explained. His finger traced an experimental pattern on the girl's full halter. "That was at the"—he prodded the firm breast —"The Bulge, you see."

"The Bulge?" the blonde asked.

"An out-of-season *brouhaha* in Belgium." Foster smiled. "Not recommended." His hands busied themselves deftly in assuring him that the blonde was nicely balanced, just so much on one side to equal the delectability on the other side.

"What were you doing in Belgium in the *winter?"* the girl asked.

"Trying to keep warm, mostly," Foster answered. "If there's one thing I hate, you succulent thing, you, it's being cold." With which the

phone quit and Foster reached up to pull the girl down on top of him.

Danny Ocean moved from the doorway, his footsteps silenced by the thick carpet, as the blonde murmured: “It’s nice and warm here.”

Jimmy Foster’s voice was somewhat obstructed by his speaking into a valley of white flesh, revealed by a disarranged halter. “Everywhere I feel,” he murmured. “Yes, sir, *everywhere* I feel.”

The bongo drum started again, as though on cue, and Danny grinned appreciatively. Ocean came to a settee that blocked his way to the bongo brunette, put a hand on its back and vaulted it lithely. He landed beside the girl with the drum and sank cross-legged to the floor.

The dark-haired girl missed only half a beat in her rhythm, but she kept her eyes pinned on Danny, and when he placed a hand on her shoulder he felt her shiver, he saw the tip of her tongue flick over her full lower lip and then stay between her white teeth, half withdrawn. Her pounding grew more frenetic, more orgiastic. Perspiration showed on her forehead and her lips parted, her eyes rolled back when, with a crash and final thump, the record ended.

The brunette’s head dropped on her chest. The blonde on the couch murmured a faint groan. Jimmy Foster made a sound that was somewhere between a sob and a chuckle.

There was a silence, and then Ocean laughed. “Nice timing, everybody,” he said. “Let’s try it with a Krupa record next time and see who wins.”

The blonde on the couch scrambled upright, adjusting herself. Jimmy Foster swung his feet to the floor and peered hazily at Danny. The brunette still contemplated her silent drum, exhausted.

“Well, Danny,” Foster said when he found his voice. “How long have you been with us?”

“Just a little while, looking on, like,” Ocean replied. “Quite something. One time when twenty-twenty vision paid off.”

The telephone began ringing again. It was enough to rouse the brunette from her entranced contemplations and she swung her brown eyes to Danny. “Somebody answer that damn thing,” she said throatily. “I go nuts when anybody lets a phone ring without answering it. It just don’t make sense.”

“So many things don’t, doll,” Danny said cheerfully. “Like you giving it all to that drum instead of a livin’, breathin’ somebody like me.”

Foster turned to pick up the phone, held it out toward Ocean. “Our dear friend Acebos. He’s probably ready to bust a gusset,” he said. “Maybe you’d better—”

"No," Danny cut in harshly. "Let him bust. Silver-tonguing us into this deal, the fat little crook." He twisted to reach for a pack of cigarettes in the slacks. "Besides," he added, "I like to make him sweat."

Foster looked at the phone in his hand, shrugged, and replaced it. "Have it your way," he said mildly. "You must admit, though, that he didn't have to silver-tongue you for long. Thirty seconds, I'd say, give or take a fraction."

Danny barked a laugh, spilling smoke. "So I went for it. So I'm a mark for things like bugles and sin—they write my story and they'll say I liked everything loud and lovely and lousy."

He reached for the brunette's limp hand that lay flaccid on the floor beside her full haunch and peered intently into the girl's palm.

"And the story of *your* life, you drummer gal, you," he said, "is that you're going to live forever. If you're nice to me, that is. Otherwise"—he peered closer and shook his head, frowning—"otherwise, if you don't make like nice I see much trouble and a houseful of kids, all with colds in their heads and it's raining outside."

The brunette gazed at him calmly. "Are you really a fortuneteller?" she asked.

"No," Danny said seriously. "Actually, I'm inherently wealthy. You see, my grandfather, bless his old bones, invented the coffee break."

The brunette's eyes were puzzled. "I don't get it," she confessed after a long pause.

"There really wasn't much to get," Ocean admitted. "Somebody used the line in an act I caught up at Vegas and I didn't think it was funny, either. But I thought maybe my sense of humor was drying up along with the rest of me so I thought I'd try it out on somebody with all the natural juices. You. My, you are just full of the natural juices, you are." He nuzzled the girl's neck hollow and felt her shiver again.

From the couch Foster said: "Hey, Danny, you want to be introduced?"

"Formalities," Ocean mumbled, still nuzzling. "Always formalities."

"The one you're testing the nap of is Helen," Jimmy went on. "This one is Delores."

The blonde in the Capris flounced off the couch, looking annoyed. "Jeez," she complained, "if I didn't have nothing in the world to do, I'd at least remember names. *I'm* Delores, f'crissake!"

"And I'm Helen," said the girl on the floor beside Danny Ocean. She ran her eyes up and down calculatingly. "Do you like progressive jazz?"

"When I listen to it right." Ocean nodded.

“That’s what I mean,” the brunette said solemnly. “What’d you think, sitting in a chair with a girdle on or something?”

“Speaking of girdles, get all gussied up, girls,” Foster said. “I’m Jimmy-buy-the-drinks, bless my stupid little heart. We’re going out and do things.”

“Hoo, boy,” blond Delores exulted, heading for the door. “I love to do things. We’ll be right back as soon as we change.”

Helen got to her feet slowly, lazily. “You ever try Dave Brubeck with one blue light on?” she asked Danny, and drifted out after Delores.

Ocean watched the door shut out the view of Helen’s final fillip and then quirked a glance at Jimmy Foster. “Man, you can pick up the weirdest ones,” he marveled. “Imagine a guy wondering if his broad was two-timing him with a bongo drum.”

“Too kookie?” Jimmy asked.

Ocean’s cashmere sweater moved with his shrug. “She just don’t make me catch fire.”

“We can always shake another tree.”

“I don’t suppose it ever hurt a guy to smoulder a little,” Danny said negligently. “Anyway, I suppose we oughta look up Vince Massler. We’ve been out here three days and we haven’t gotten around to it yet.”

Foster got to his feet and padded across the room toward the bar on which rested two fifths of Jack Daniels, a bottle of Green Stripe, a bucket of half-melted ice, a pitcher of water, and—Danny winced—a bottle of ginger ale. Delores, Ocean supposed; she looked the type.

Foster spoke over his wide, tanned shoulder. “While you were out and around,” he said, too casually, even half apologetically, “I took it upon myself to get in touch with Vince.” He splashed Scotch into a glass and added water, then turned back to Ocean.

“He won’t come in, Sergeant,” he said. “To use his own words, prettied up a bit, he wouldn’t touch it with your big toe.”

If he had expected Ocean to show disappointment, chagrin, dismay, he could not have known Danny Ocean as well as he should. The man on the floor dragged at his cigarette before he said quietly: “Don’t worry about Vince. I’ll talk to him. He really is emcee at that burly night spot?”

Foster nodded. “But I don’t think talking to him will do any good, Sergeant, not even coming from you. He’s got his mind made up to say no.”

Suddenly Ocean grinned. The smile transformed his dark features into an inexplicably lovable face. “Look, Lieutenant, I had that guy by

the short hair all the way from Sicily to the Siegfried Line. I know him."

"You *knew* him," Foster corrected. "He's changed. He's pretty low on hair now, short or otherwise."

"He'll listen," said Danny Ocean. "He'll listen—he's got to."

"I hope," Foster said, and finished his drink, looked down at the bottom of the empty glass. "I hope they all listen to you, Sergeant. You're the one who ties this all together and sometimes I get panic-stricken about this being too much of a job, even for you with your compelling charm. Corneal, Bergdorf, Sam Harmon—My God, how can you expect Harmon to drop everything and fly in from Hawaii just because you say you want him here?"

Ocean got to his feet in one lithe movement. "Sam's already on his way," he said easily. "You're like all the rest, Lieutenant: you worry too much. Don't—it'll be fine. Sam's coming and Rog Corneal is getting Tony Bergdorf. I'll have Vince signed up tonight and then we'll go after Lou Jackson. The others—hell, you make it tough on yourself, worrying all the time. Relax, Lieutenant. We'll have them all there when it's time to move. You'll see."

Jimmy Foster reached for the Scotch. "A reunion," he said wryly. "No funny hats or electric canes for goosing girls but a bloody reunion, just the same." He hoisted four fingers of Scotch and said: "Auld Lang Syne. To the Eighty-second Airborne's finest platoon, may they all die rich, every one."

"They will," said Danny Ocean, "if they don't blow it as fast as they make it. Which will be in one minute and thirty-eight seconds' working time, the way we've got it figured."

3

The Arizona Club, where Danny Ocean and Jimmy Foster sought Vince Massler, turned out to be a place known inelegantly in theater parlance as a scratch house. The glaring, animated neon signs outside the sagging little building promised Elysian delights provided by GIRLS, GIRLS, GIRLS!, but when Foster and Danny walked inside, Delores and Helen on their arms, their noses wrinkled at the smell, their ears cringed from the music, and their eyes went bleak at sight of the *décor* and the customers.

Poor Vince, Ocean murmured inwardly, *from top stunt man in pictures to this dump in a couple of years. Goes to show what happens to a guy when he loses his nerve.*

"What're we doin' here?" Delores was demanding loudly. "I thought you said we were goin' places and doin' things."

“We are,” Foster promised. “We have to see a man here first and then we’re going on our festive rounds. Be patient, my sweet.”

“But, Jimmy,” the blonde cried, “we’re the only girls in the place.”

Foster looked through the smoke at the small stage where a naked woman was doing a dance with a large sluggish python as a partner. “That looks rather like a girl there, don’t you think?” he asked. “Take heart, old dear, none of these men will bother you—you’ve got too many clothes on.”

Helen spoke in her customary calm. “You say,” she observed. “After looking at a bare-assed bag like that they get the hots just seeing a woman in a dress.”

She looked around the tawdry little dive and smiled secretively, inhaled slowly to the fullest capacity of her low-cut gown. The snake dancer might have been performing in the middle of the Mojave Desert for all the audience she had at that moment. “Not that I mind,” Helen added, as an afterthought.

They were guided to a tiny table with a soiled cloth. A waiter who had stopped believing in deodorant ads months before took their order. Danny Ocean mentally chalked up a win bet: Delores asked for bourbon and ginger ale.

Onstage, the snake dancer, visibly chagrined over the diversion caused by Helen’s deep breathing, decided to recapture her audience by adding a few wallops to her routine. These ad-libbed kicks involved manipulation of the snake in a manner in which no python had ever been intended to be handled. The performance rapidly skidded beyond the bawdy, and Danny Ocean found his teeth on edge, but Helen the calm, Helen the imperturbable, wet her lips and left her tongue between her teeth. Delores made up her face: it was doubtful that she noticed what was going on or would have understood it if she had.

The performance finally ended, and the woman undulated off to a growl of lecherous applause, featured by some pithy suggestions as to what would happen next, offstage.

“Get a load of the Pride of Texas,” Ocean told Foster. “Three tables down. The hat.”

Jimmy glanced in the direction of Danny’s head jerk. There, surrounded by four other large men, all immense in horse-blanket sports coats and wearing an outsized ten-gallon hat, sat a particularly obnoxious man who could have posed as a caricature of a Texan. He was foghorn-voiced, drunk, foul-tongued and, even seen at this distance, obviously looking for somebody who might dispute his right to make a spectacle of himself.

“Wonder what part of Chicago they’re from?” Jimmy murmured,

and then turned his attention toward the dingy stage as the uproar subsided and a man came on and approached the microphone.

This was Vince Massler, onetime king of movie stunt men, the Vince Massler who until a couple of years ago had taken stunt assignments others had labeled suicidal and had carried them out with a flair that was a bit riskier than the scripts demanded. This was the Vince Massler who never had let a nerve show, even during the rough days of The Bulge—until something had happened, some relatively minor slipup, a nothing, that had showed the awful effect of all those years of refusing to acknowledge normal fear. After that, Vince hadn't been able to take a stunt job of any kind, even a trip-wire horse fall, and his flagellating shame had driven him out of Hollywood into an obscurity that had made Danny Ocean's job of finding him so hard. And here he was, emceeing a scratch house burly grind.

Danny eyed the man, masking his shock at the change in Vince. Jimmy had been right about the hair: old Vincerino was getting pretty bald. Thick in the middle, too, where once he had been built of rawhide and spring steel. He looked soft, inside and out. Too soft for this job, the big one?

Ocean hoped not. In all the planning that had gone before, Vince Massler had always figured right up front. Danny owed it to Massler to deal Vince in.

—The kraut Tiger came around the pile of burnt-out rubble that had been the post office and there he was, Danny Ocean, about to be killed. It's an awful thing to look up and see the probing, reaching, touching snout of a Tiger's eighty-eight gun with its flame shield like a wire cover they had over the light bulbs at the P.A.L. gym, only thick iron strips, not chicken wire.

—For some reason Danny Ocean had crouched there, held fastened to the snow and mud and brick bits and charred wood of the spot, examining the welding of the gun's flash shield and feeling the hot flush of his own urine and still tugging crazily at Sam Harmon, pinned in the lousy sonofabitch fucking wreckage. The bazooka lay twenty feet away and twisted, useless; he and Sam had emptied it into the bank vault door a minute, a second, before the shell burst had knocked them down, Sam under all this stuff, alive and grunting: Danny, Danny, Danny!

—They'd been lucky up till now. They'd gone in on the banks while the krauts were still shooting the unlucky bastards out of the trees, the two of them, the bazooka team. Never mind securing the Goddam intersection or bridge or command post—hit the bank.

—Most times it had been lousy Reichsmarks but sometimes it was the good gold mark or even counterfeit U.S. bank notes or pounds sterling or Argentine dough, and the way Danny Ocean had it set up, it went back to

Marseilles and then to London and then Lisbon and finally back to the States, thirty-two cents on the dollar when it was all through and everybody got their cut.

—Danny remembered all the dough he had back in the good old U.S.A., close to forty grand, and all his if he'd just turn loose from this bastard he was tugging at, his partner who'd expect his cut even if it was only out of the eight grand he'd told Sam they had banked.

—Danny, Danny, Danny! *the sonofabitch kept moaning, and Ocean screamed:* Turn me loose, ya bastid! *The tracks of the Tiger squealed for lack of grease and the crunch of them on the blackened bricks was like the tramp of heavy feet on old bones.*

—Turn me loose! *Danny screamed again, and then there was Vince Massler beside him with a grenade, the pin still dangling from his teeth* (the crazy bastid wouldn't pull them like you were supposed to: always with his teeth) *and his thumb clamped over the trigger spring. Something, a brick fragment, a spent round, maybe his own clumsiness climbing into the carrier, had made a big dent in Vince's steel but his tight smile, the way he moved in front of Sam and Ocean, was like God putting a hand on a guy's shoulder.*

—I got him, Sarge, *Vince said,* muff down. *And he threw the grenade into the Tiger's belly and Jesus it came apart in a blast of fiery oil and zinging steel and lumps of men who yelled for mercy.* Helfen, *kraut, from me?*

"A funny thing happened to me on the way to the theayter tonight," Vince Massler was parroting onstage. Danny opened his eyes, shook himself loose from the smell of burning oil and flesh. Was Massler parodying the jerk emcee or was he really that cornball? As Vince proceeded, Ocean groaned deep within himself. Vince was playing it straight: Vince was from awful.

"The things I suffer for your sake, *mon sergent,"* Foster was muttering. "If I survive this the other will be a breeze."

Danny sat slumped in his chair, writhing with embarrassment for Vince Massler. Who in God's name had ever convinced him to try the emcee business? Why didn't he take a plain job like pumping gas or running a garbage truck?

Which brought Josh to mind. He wondered how Josh was making out on the garbage run. Okay, he was sure: all the boys would fit their spots as though they'd been made for them. *If* they could be found. *If* they'd all throw in.

"And now," Vince was proclaiming onstage, "a sweet little bundle from Texas." There was a howled greeting from the sombreroed drunk three tables down. "Sweet as chocolate candy. The tantalizing—*Sugar Face!"*

The four-piece band that Ocean was sure was made up of rejects of a Major Bowes' amateur unit of 1929 straggled into "A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody" and out from the dingy wings came a girl who did not belong in the Arizona Club. She was the girl who should have lived next door (but never did) when a boy was growing up, a tiny honey blonde with a face so fresh and appealing with its freckle-sprinkled, tip-tilted nose, its wide, innocent eyes, its delectable mouth curved in a sunny smile, that she might have wandered into this joint by mistake, looking for a high-school sorority meeting.

"What's a child like that doing in a place like—" Jimmy Foster began, but that was as far as he got because at that moment Sugar Face went into her act. She did not believe in a tease strip: she was direct and to the point. One zip of a zipper denuded her except for a minuscule G-string, black net stockings with red garters and high-heeled black slippers.

She had a body to go with her face, young, virginal. Her breasts were melon-round with pert nipples, her belly was deliciously dimpled, her hips and thighs were tight-skinned, buoyant, doubly seductive after the flaccid flesh of the snake dancer.

With no such serpent or any fan, bubble, or other prop to depend upon, Danny wondered briefly how the little lady was going to hold the audience's interest after that abrupt unveiling. He did not have to wait long to find out. Sugar Face went into a dance that made the usual bump and grind resemble a staid *chaconne.*

Danny got to his feet as Vince Massler edged his way through the tables to their side. At close quarters Massler seemed even older, wearier, less the man Danny had known. His inexpertly applied make-up gave him the appearance of a painted cadaver; the eyes that Danny remembered as keen, eager, were drilled now, and when they met Ocean's they tried to slide away, held onto the slighter man's only with visible effort.

"Well, Vincerino," Danny said. "Long time."

Massler stretched out his hand to meet Ocean's. His grip was firm enough but Ocean sensed a contrived, artificial heartiness in the handshake that was worse than a slack, limp shake would have been. He felt a staggering disappointment, the first doubt that Vince Massler could be recruited or, indeed, that Vince was the man he wanted. His smile, his voice, reflected none of this.

"Been too long, Danny," Vince said huskily. "Lotta water under the dam and all that jazz." He gave Ocean an up-and-down inspection. "You ain't changed, Sarge," he said, after a pause. "You look just the same."

"You, too," Danny lied. He reached over to an empty chair at an

adjoining table and swiveled it under Massler. “Take five. Meet Helen and Delores.”

Massler nodded his balding head at the girls. Delores gave him lofty, high-fashion greeting, but Helen didn’t unglue her eyes from Sugar Face’s contortions.

“What’ll you have to drink?” Ocean asked. “Or do you carry your own bottle in here for your own protection?”

Vince grinned feebly, flicked his eyes toward the stage. “I don’t want nothin, thanks,” he said. “I can’t stay, anyways. I gotta be back up there in a second.” He lowered himself to the rickety chair, folded his massive hands on the spotted tablecloth and looked down at their white knuckles.

“Look, Danny,” he said. His voice was so low that Ocean barely caught it over the off-key strains of the band. “Look, the lieutenant gave it to me when I saw him and I told him then. I—I can’t come in.”

Ocean shrugged slightly, reached for the pack of cigarettes in front of him, shook one out and offered it to Vince. Massler said no, thanks, and Danny took his time lighting the cigarette. He blew a stream of smoke into the murk overhead, dragged at his cigarette again. Massler hunched over his hands, scowled and blurted:

“I never figured you’d go this route, Danny. When the lieutenant told me I—well, anyways, seein’ you are hittin’ this kick I’m glad you’re startin’ at the top of the hill.”

Ocean carefully tapped nonexistent ash from his cigarette. “Vince, the thing’s a kick in,” he said quietly. “I give you my word, and I only lie to broads.”

Vince’s fingers twisted, clenched again. “If it’s a kick in how come nobody’s done it before?” he asked.

Ocean smiled slowly. “For the same reason nobody’s gone to the moon yet. You gotta have the know-how and the equipment, Vince.”

Foster leaned toward Massler from the other side of the table. “And we have both, man. It’ll be a military operation executed by trained men.”

Ocean said: “The way we figure it, Vince, it’d be a cryin’ shame to let all those cute tricks the Army taught us just go down the terlet drain, just because things ain’t makin’ like war right now. You know we’ve got a big investment wrapped up in our know-how, boy. We oughta put it to some use, huh?”

Massler shook his head, slowly, doggedly, as he watched his hands. “I can’t do it, Danny,” he said. “I—I got my wife to think of.”

“Think of her as *rich,”* Ocean said quietly.

“Yeah, and think of me as *dead,”* Vince Massler countered. “I’d get

it, Sarge. I'd be sure to be the one that got it."

Ocean snorted. "You went through the war without even gettin' the clap and you hoisted everything you could get to hold still. You're old Iron Man Massler. You'll live forever."

Again the weary, stubborn headshake. "That was before. Now, I'm about as iron man as a lily cup. You don't want me."

"The hell we don't, Vince," Danny Ocean said. "Why d'you think we came out here to Phoenix after you?"

Massler's eyes were tortured as they dragged themselves up to meet Ocean's. "Because you thought you'd find the guy that pulled duty with you in the Eighty-second," he said. "Maybe you didn't hear about how the great Vince Massler—"

"Yeah, I heard some crap about that," Ocean cut in. "I didn't believe it. I still don't. So maybe you flipped a little; so you deserved to, after all that time *not* flippin. Man, you stood up to a tank, remember? So suppose you didn't make it one time. So is it fatal, losin' one round out of fifteen? You get bumped in the backstretch and do they right away post the winner and pay off in the mutuels shed? You got a long way to go to make up for that bad one, Vince, if you think it was important."

Massler was shaking his head again. "It's no good, Danny," he almost whimpered. "Maybe I'd try it if it was only me, but my wife—"

"Where's your wife?" Danny demanded. "Maybe I should talk to her."

Vince Massler nodded his head toward the stage where Sugar Face was reaching a minor climax of sorts. "That's her," the emcee said. "Sugar Face is my wife."

Jimmy Foster had the exclamation wrenched from him by his surprise. "You mean it? *Sugar Face?"*

Massler swung his head toward Jimmy, the beginnings of a scowl replacing the dreary hopelessness on his painted face. "Yeah, she is," he growled in a voice that bore a touch of the old Massler. "Why?"

"Very lovely girl," Ocean cut in before Foster could frame his answer. "She deserves things, Vince. Like a sable down to her ankles and a car half a block long and diamonds like hens' eggs. All that pretty stuff oughta be wrapped up in the best instead of paradin' it in front of these jerks."

"I know, I know," Vince muttered, "but she—"

Whatever he had been about to say was drowned out by a roar from three tables away. One of Sugar Face's gyrations apparently had pressed the drunkest "Texan's" button. The big man charged toward the low stage, his arms outstretched.

“C’mon, baby,” he yowled. “I got what you need and plenty of it.”

Ocean was on his feet but not before Vince Massler. Sugar Face’s husband rocketed through the tables toward the Texan at the footlights. The balding emcee’s face was contorted, his fists began sledge-hammering before he was within reach of the man pawing at the nearly nude girl on the stage.

“Hit the exits, girls,” Danny Ocean flung over his shoulder at Delores and Helen. “We look like we’re gonna be busy for a while.”

“Men,” cried Jimmy Foster, “follow me.” He circled his hand above his head briefly before he launched himself at the fracas at the foots.

Vince Massler needed no help with the big man in the ten-gallon hat. He was rapidly, methodically destroying the hulk who had outraged Sugar Face. The big man’s four table companions, however, were all as large as the one Vince was slaughtering and a degree less drunk, a bit tougher to deal with. By the time Jimmy and Danny got there, Vince was taking it from all directions. Not that Massler was slowed up: he shook off the blows that thudded into his face and riveted his attentions on the sagging figure who had started it all.

Danny Ocean’s high good humor soared as he plunged into the battle, Foster at his side. It had been too long since either had been in a good fight; it was a joy to call back all the intricate niceties of mayhem they had been taught by Uncle Sam so many years ago.

Ocean parried a flailing left hook with a wrist chop that must have numbed his assailant’s arm for a week, then came in under the following right and buried his own right wrist deep in the man’s belly. He heard a belching groan, felt his immediate antagonist crumple and bend and turned to the next good man. This one had a split of soda in his hand and as it whistled through the air at Ocean, the smaller man went in close and came up butting. His head and the bottle swinger’s chin made resounding contact.

Next?

Next was the point man of a flying wedge of bouncers who arrived, swinging. Other customers had joined in the clem by this time and the musicians, doubtless overjoyed by this break in the monotony of watching lewdness on parade, had deserted their mistreated instruments to take a hand. There were shouts, curses, the sound of splintering wood and breaking glass. Some woman, either Sugar Face or Delores (certainly not Helen, the cool), was screaming and the boss of the joint was yelling: “The cops! Where in Gawd’s name are the cops?”

Danny Ocean took a slamming punch beside the head, struck out blindly, made contact with somebody’s nose, which gave. The going was getting sticky: everybody was jammed so closely together that it

was hard to get a full swing at a target, much less defend against potshots from the flanks.

"Fall back and regroup," Jimmy Foster cried. "This way, men."

Danny and Vince reacted instinctively. They dropped back three or four paces, ranged themselves on either side of Foster, and began taking them as they came. Bouncers, bandsmen and burlesque devotees all focused their attention on the trio, three men against the mob, but three former airborne infantrymen trained in every known brand of fighting, mostly dirty. As the charge met the thin rank it slowed, crumpled, collapsed. Ocean, Foster, and Massler fought a grudging rearguard action and their wake was dotted by disabled men who clutched their faces, their middles and their groins, swearing, and, in two instances, throwing up.

"Over to the right," Massler panted during a momentary lull in the storm. "There's a side door."

"You forget," Danny Ocean said. He paused to chop down a windmilling bouncer with a hand-edge slice to the cheekbone. "You forget we got ladies waiting for us."

Massler made passing comment on what should be done to the waiting ladies. Ocean said not now, later, and the three continued their retirement from the battle scene. They would have made the outside much sooner if Jimmy Foster had not paused at the hat-check counter and retrieved his and Danny's straws, meticulously leaving a dollar for the missing hat-check girl. A moment later the trio backed into the night. From a distance could be heard the wail of approaching sirens.

"I thought we were goin' places," Delores complained immediately from a shadow near the front door of the Arizona Club. "You call this goin' places?"

Foster seized the blonde and began running her down the street, away from the tumult. "This was just an appetizer," he explained. "From now on it gets quite lively."

Danny Ocean took Helen by the elbow, turned to Massler. "What about Sugar Face?" he asked. "Will she be all right or do we go back in and rescue her?"

Massler's grin was visible in the intermittent light from the flashing neon sign. "Sugar Face could take care of herself in the middle of the charge of the Light Brigade," he said. "She'll be just fine. Let's blow."

The five hurried through alleys and down side streets until they were at a respectable distance from the shambles that had been the Arizona Club. They stopped to catch their breath and Delores took advantage of the pause to complain again about not going anywhere.

Vince Massler paused in wiping gore from his chin and eyed the blonde wonderingly. “Is she real?” he asked Foster.

“Recent tests say so.” Jimmy nodded. “How are you feeling, Vince?”

The onetime stunt man looked about him and inhaled deeply, arched his shoulders, made a vague pass at the night air. “I feel wunnerful,” he said. “I don’t know what happened but I ain’t felt this good in a long time, not since—Well, in a long time.”

“Sergeant?” Foster asked.

“Okay,” Ocean said. “But who’d think you’d find a Pier Six here, and so far from the water front, too?”

“Sometimes I think you could find a fight in an abandoned coal mine,” Foster grunted.

“Nuts,” Danny protested. “I was just sitting there minding my own business, wasn’t I? All I was doing was trying to convince Massler here, that—” He broke it off and shot a look at Vince, the new Vince who had emerged from the battle royal.

The grease-painted emcee in the shreds of the cheap tux caught his glance and grinned through puffed lips. “You still want me in, Sarge?” he asked.

“You know I do.”

“Then I’m in,” Massler said. “I only hope I don’t jinx the deal, is all. But you say it’s foolproof, huh, a kick in?”

Ocean nodded, but Jimmy Foster felt compelled to say: “You might as well know, Vince, it’s not really foolproof. A lot could happen. It’s as nearly foolproof as anything like this can be but we’ve always got to reckon with the human factor in the total equation.”

“What he’s tryin’ to say,” Danny Ocean explained, “is that it might get a little itchy in case somebody fouls up.”

Massler hunched his thick shoulders. “So it gets itchy—I don’t care. You saw Sugar Face and you saw those jerks. I don’t want her to have to take any more of that crap.”

“Neither do I,” Ocean said. “I don’t want you to have to, either, Vince.” His hand emerged from a trousers pocket, doubled over a sheaf of bills. He reached out to tuck the money in the breast pocket of the rumpled garment that never had been a dinner jacket, always a tux from its first *schlock* stitching. Vince made an ineffectual grab at Ocean’s hand but when the bills were in his pocket he let them stay there.

“Jeez, Danny,” he said, almost shyly, “you know you don’t have to __”

“Let’s can the gee-whiz routine. You’ll earn it back,” Danny cut in. He took an envelope from an inside pocket and offered it to Massler.

"Here's your plane ticket. When you get there, go to the address that's on the card with the ticket. Ask for Josh Howard; he'll fill you in on what's cookin'."

Massler looked down at the envelope, then back at Danny, his bruised grin widening. "Josh Howard is in with us?" he asked, and when Ocean nodded, he laughed. "I feel good about the whole deal, then. Josh never picked a losin' side in his life."

"Except during the little business of being born," Jimmy Foster said idly.

Vince's head came up with a jerk. "Well, accourse there was nothin' he could do about *that,"* he said. "I mean since then."

"Are we or ain't we goin' places?" Delores asked petulantly. "Talk, talk, talk—nothin' but talk."

"Right away, Gorgeous," Ocean said. "Looks like we're through here." He started to turn away, then swung back to Vince. "What's the latest you hear on Lou Jackson?"

"The last I heard he was in Salt Lake," Massler replied. "That was awhile back, though."

"We heard that, too." Ocean sighed. "I was hopin' he'd moved somewhere maybe a little livelier but I guess it's Salt Lake." He shook his head. "Honest t'Gawd, you'd think every one of the old gang was duckin' subpoenas, the way they've scattered. You in Phoenix and Lou in Salt Lake, Sam Harmon in Hawaii—Why don't you guys stay put?"

"There are quite a few of the old platoon who have stayed put, Sergeant," Jimmy Foster said thoughtfully. "With pretty little flags over them every May thirtieth."

There was a brief silence, and then Vince Massler said: "Yeah. Yeah, I guess we were the lucky ones, huh?"

"Lucky?" Danny Ocean asked. "You don't know what real luck is, Vince, till we put over this deal."

For a moment Massler reverted to his earlier doubts. "It takes luck, Danny? I thought you said—"

"I said it and I meant it: we got the men and we got the equipment; we got the planning and we got the know-how. But there's always the luck angle in everything, Vince. You oughta know that. Good luck and bad luck. With us it's all goin' to be good."

He turned toward the silent Helen, his night's work finished, his appetite for play rising. "See you around, Vince," he said. "Keep your face buttoned. That means with everybody."

"Sure, sure." Massler nodded. "But what'll I tell my wife? What'll I tell Sugar Face?"

"Tell her you love her," Danny Ocean said negligently. "That's all

they ever wanta hear, anyway."

4

And later, in the motel bedroom.

"Oh, Danny, Danny. I never thought anybody—no blue lights, no music, no nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Everything! But, my God, Danny, I can't *stand* it."

"Shh. You'll wake up the whole joint, baby."

"I don't care. Let 'em wake up. It's wonderful! It's *too* wonderful. Oh, Danny, Danny Ocean."

He smothered her complaints with his mouth.

But before he found sleep beside the exhausted girl he thought of Bea, and all his contentment was drained away, the repletion given him by gorged-upon woman flesh soured in his soul, and Danny Ocean lay, shriveled and cold and alone, and stared up at the ceiling.

CHAPTER TWO...

1

"The mistake I made," Spyros Acebos said glumly, "was letting Foster go with Ocean in the first place. I thought—I hoped—one would act on the other like a check. Instead, I *accommodated* them."

He was slumped in a chair near the sliding glass panels that opened onto the lanai and pool of his Beverly Hills mansion. "Mansion" was the right word to use in describing the home of Spyros Acebos: it was an impressive pile built by a television comic who unfortunately had come to regard himself as indispensable. The key property in a multimillion-dollar programming package, the comic (what *was* his name?) had decided to make teevee history by demanding twenty million dollars a year or he walked off the show. He had been permitted to walk, and his stroll had carried him completely out of the public ken, not to speak of the Beverly Hills mansion.

Upon his graduation from Leavenworth, Spyros Acebos had rented these grand living quarters, as he had from time to time leased other large properties in West Palm Beach, Long Island, Bar Harbor, Hot Springs and way stations. A man does not replace rented furniture out of his own pocket so the *décor* of this Beverly Hills place remained a nightmarish mélange that resembled nothing more than a movie set for which directions had demanded a PENTHOUSE-RANCH HOUSE—NEWPORT VANDERBILT COMBINATION ULTRA MODERNE LAID ON THICK.

It mattered little to Acebos that the decorator who had outfitted this place had prostituted his art by succumbing to the departed comic's hideous tastes: if the furniture had been Larkins Soap Catalogue mission oak he would not have changed a stick of it. The sad-faced racketeer had few artistic tastes. He considered a chair something to sit on, a couch something to nap upon, or to attempt (usually unsuccessfully) a seduction upon, a picture something that hung on a wall. His only recorded criticism of any of the household possessions he had temporarily acquired on lease was the mild comment that "this sofa's too short to lay a broad on." It was directed at a gilded English settee decorated in gesso, *circa* 1724, which later found its way into the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Now Spyros' chair was of stainless steel and foam rubber, comfortable despite its weird design, but Acebos seemed to find no ease in its embrace. The drink Mushy O'Conners had fixed for him

remained untasted on the end table beside him, a little horror of marble and onyx, its legs consisting of four nude Amazons with upraised arms, and his long, heavily periqued cigarette smouldered unsmoked in the black glass-and-silver tray beside the drink.

"Meanwhile," Spyros continued, "time grows short. It's only a few days till Christmas already and where's our technical personnel? Where's the man who blows things up? And our master electrician—what's his name?"

At the upholstered blue leather and pink formica bar Mushy O'Conners screwed his maltreated features into an ape's frown, stuck his tongue out of a corner of his mouth, and tried to add one more story to the skyscraper of playing cards he was building.

"That's Bergdorf, Tony Bergdorf," he reminded Acebos. "Din't you know Danny sent Corneal to Frisco to get him?"

Spyros grunted dismally. "Danny Ocean is so secretive he probably kept it from his mother that he was born," he muttered. He picked up his glass and sipped the drink: it could have been spiked with essence of aloes. "Well, this Bergdorf had better be an electrical genius or the whole undertaking is doomed from its inception."

Mushy paused in his pasteboard construction work long enough to shoot an admiring glance across the room. That was one of the few things he liked about Mr. Acebos, those educated things he said every once in a while. Call him a dope in so many things, a screwball that flipped on the hour every hour over the least little go-wrong, a patsy for the oldest gag, but he sure could handle the language when he wanted to. Like "the whole undertaking is doomed from its inception" bit: most guys would say something like "we get it right in the nuts before we even leave the dressing room."

"Now, don't go worryin'," Mushy said soothingly. "Tony's the best. Wait and see."

It did not have the desired effect. Acebos gave a cry of anguish.

"Waiting, I am; seeing, I'm not," he squalled. "So where is he then, this electrician? Do I see him? *I don't see him!"*

The sound waves emanating from the stricken man in the chair cycloned Mushy's tower, sending the cards spilling. O'Conners sighed, stilled his reproach. It wouldn't do any good to tell the boss that he had been getting close to a record, fifteen stories high, and Spyros ought to yell in the other direction. Mr. Acebos wasn't with it when it came to building card houses: he called it many things, none of them polite.

Mushy stooped to pick up the cards that had fallen behind the bar. His voice came to Acebos slightly muffled. "I keep tellin' you it'll be all right," he said. "Leave it to Danny Ocean. Or if you got it in your

head that Danny's off on a kick, there's Jimmy Foster, ain't there?" He straightened and said reassuringly: "The lieutenant is right there with Danny to steer him right if he needs steerin'."

Acebos snorted. "I just now told you I made a mistake sending Foster with Ocean," he reminded Mushy. "Maybe we all made a mistake dealing Foster in in the first place, a rich playboy like him."

"You didn't make no mistake about the lieutenant, Mr. Acebos," O'Conners said earnestly. "Next to Danny, Jimmy Foster's the smartest guy I know. And he ain't really rich, remember."

"His mother, that Mrs. Restes, is," Spyros glowered.

"Yeah," Mushy agreed, "Jimmy's mother is loaded, all right. She oughta be: five husbands already and every one but that Eyetalian count carryin' nothin' but money." He began shuffling the cards. He always shuffled them thoroughly between building projects, why, he could not have explained. "But Mrs. Restes' dough ain't Jimmy Foster's dough."

"Don't she give him everything he asks for?" Acebos cried. "Hasn't she always kept him in loot since he was a little boy hardly old enough to see over the wheel of his Mercedes? Isn't all he has to do is hold out his hand and there's the bundle?"

"Sure, sure, boss, you're right," Mushy O'Conners said, "but he has to *ask,* don't he?"

"This is some kind of torture?"

"Not for me it wouldn't be," Mushy said reasonably. "Me, I'd think I earned it, like, puttin' up with some of them characters Mrs. Restes was married to, rich bums it musta been tough on the kid, Jimmy, to call Pop."

"You don't call your mother's other four husbands Pop," Spyros said.

"Whatever you call 'em, then. What I'm sayin' is that me and you, we'd hold out our hand and take the bundle from Mamma and we wouldn't ache no place. But Jimmy's different. He never acts like it but I betcha it gripes him to take dough his mamma gets in alimony from some jerk he never could look at without wantin' to sock him on account of he's in that bedroom. That's why he's in on this deal, Mr. Acebos. He wants some dough of his *own."*

"So let him go out and find it, then," Acebos said. "Why does he have to be included in this?"

"Because Danny Ocean wouldn't move without the lieutenant, is why," Mushy explained patiently. "If Danny's got a hero, like, it's Jimmy Foster. Lieutenant Jimmy Foster, the guy that ran the old platoon."

Spyros picked up the cigarette and found it had expired in the tray. He reached for a three-pound silver lighter and snapped it. There was no spark: there had been none since Acebos had moved into this mansion: there would be none so long as he continued to live there. Spyros Acebos had bought racing stables, investment houses, labor unions, legislators, but he had never bought a lighter flint in his life.

He cursed, as always, and plucked a pack of matches from his coat pocket and lit the butt. Smoke that would have corroded a diesel exhaust streamed out of his nostrils and his mouth as he spoke.

"If anybody should inquire, Jimmy Foster has done your precious Danny Ocean no great service," he said. "Ocean has been the intimate associate of Foster ever since the war and now Ocean must support himself in the manner to which Jimmy Foster has accustomed him." He thought that over, examining the syntax, and coppered the bet.

"To," he added.

He inhaled enormously again and cloaked his words with blue-black smoke. "Not," he said, "that I'm complaining about that, you understand, Mushy. If it were not for this we would not have Mr. Danny Ocean in this deal at all."

He remembered his outrage at the silent treatment he had been given by Ocean in Phoenix, Arizona, and lurched out of his chair, crossed the vermilion-carpeted floor, and seized the phone on the bar. "Operator, Operator," he began screaming as soon as he placed his stubby forefinger in the dialing hole.

"Take it easy, boss," Mushy counseled. "You ain't gonna reach all the way to Phoenix, just yellin'."

"Now I can't even get the long-distance operator," Spyros wailed. "They won't even answer me any more. It's a plot. Somehow that Ocean has got the whole Bell Telephone System on his side."

He slammed down the phone hysterically and waddled back to his chair, seized up his drink, and drank thirstily.

"Wait till I lay hands on that man," he said when he set down the glass with a slopping clatter. "Just wait till Mr. Danny Ocean gets within reaching distance." He looked down at his trembling hands hooked into talons.

Mushy smiled indulgently from the bar. Mr. Acebos better hadn't let himself get so burned he'd do something foolish like getting tough with the sergeant, personally. If Mr. Acebos had to have things done, he'd better let somebody else do them for him.

"Hey, boss," he said, to break in on the dark-faced one's bitter brooding. "I forgot to tell you."

It was enough to bring Spyros' head up with a jerk. Mushy often

forgot to tell him things, inconsequential things, some on which the fate of Acebos' private empires depended. The seated man's rage turned to fear bordering on panic. What was it this time?

"So?" he croaked. "So maybe you'll be good enough to inform me even at this late date?"

O'Conners completed the second floor of his new project and nodded. "Sure, sure. We was just talkin' about her and I forgot to tell you the poop I heard about her and him."

Acebos uttered a strangled sound. "Would you be so good as to tell me who you mean when you refer to her and him?" he asked, under tight rein.

"Mrs. Restes, accourse," O'Conners said. He took a card from the pack and began to balance the north wall of the third floor, then dropped the card and chose another. The discarded pasteboard was the trey of clubs and experience had proven to Mushy that no club below the nine should be used in side-wall construction.

"Mrs. Restes?" Acebos asked with ominous calm.

"Well, yeah. You know we was talkin' about the lieutenant's mamma, the one that's been married five times, the one with all the dough."

Spyros breathed heavily. "I know," he said steadily. "I remember, Mushy. It was just a minute ago. What about Mrs. Restes?"

"Well, she's got this new boy friend," O'Conners said.

Acebos relaxed. So Mrs. Restes had not discovered what her son was involved in; she had not informed the Nevada constabulary, the FBI, or the United Nations. No, she had this new boy friend. How nice.

"How nice," he said aloud.

"Yeah." Mushy nodded. "Well, she's a damn good-lookin' woman, boss. She don't look old enough to be Jimmy's mother, not when she gets all fixed up like she is all the time, anyways. She must spend a lotta dough on clothes, that old doll. I seen her one time—"

"Mushy." Spyros spoke in a near whisper. "Get to the point. I take it that there is something more to what you forgot than that a lady who has already been married five times has a new boy friend. Even for you, Mushy, that is not enough reason to inject this subject into the conversation at this time."

But O'Conners was bound up in the task of laying the floor of the fourth story, the ceiling of the third. Acebos had to wait, and the waiting did nothing for his hypertension.

The delicate operation finally completed, the battered former pug said: "Well, yeah, there's more. Mrs. Restes' new boy friend is that guy Santos." He looked up and smiled winsomely. "I thought you'd wanta

know."

The man in the chair stared back at Mushy, his face gone gray, his fleshy mouth ajar, his eyes aghast.

"Duke Santos?"

Mushy nodded placidly.

"You're sure?" Spyros Acebos asked huskily.

Mushy moved the broad shoulders that had rubbed resin from so many ring floors. "You know how these things are," he said expertly. "You get a word here and a word there and mostly it's crap, but you gotta digest them, like, and you get a fact once in a while." He smiled. "This Santos bit I digested into a fact."

Acebos covered his face with his hands. "This has to happen to me," he keened. "Out of all the men Jimmy Foster's mamma could be courting, she has got to pick on Duke Santos, that—that—that *crook!"*

"You got nothin' to worry about, boss," Mushy said with vast assurance. "First place, Jimmy hardly never sees his mamma—he gets his checks by mail—and whenever he does see her it's about some special dough he might need and he takes it and says thanks and that's all. He wouldn't tell her nothin', and if he did she wouldn't know what he was talkin' about anyways. Mrs. Restes may be a good-lookin' lady but from what I hear she's strictly screwball."

"But Duke Santos, my friend, is not strictly screwball, not screwball at all," Acebos gritted. "Duke Santos is one of the most unscrewball men ever spawned by the devil. He's a crook, a smart crook, so shrewd he has trouble keeping from cheating himself. Let him get wind of what we're trying to do and we will find Mr. Duke Santos in our lap demanding nourishment."

He scowled blackly at the glass in his hand. "It has been said that into each life some rain must fall but with me it has been a cloudburst in the form of Duke Santos," he said sadly. "Now I find he's in this picture before we've even begun to see who stands where."

Mushy paused in the placement of a card on which the permanence of the fifth floor depended. "Take it easy," he said. "Santos ain't in the pixture. I oney said he was makin' a play for Mrs. Restes, is all. He'll be so busy gettin' her to say yes, with all her dough, that he won't have time to interfere in nothin' else, even if he heard about it, which he won't."

"You're wrong, Mushy," Spyros Acebos said. "He'll hear about it. He'll get the rich Mrs. Restes to say yes the first time he asks her. Which will be in plenty of time for him to turn his attentions to us and our operation. You mark my words."

"Aw, boss—" Mushy began, and then the telephone rang.

O'Conners' latest house of cards went flying as Spyros flung himself at the phone and shrieked into the mouthpiece.

"Yes, yes, it's me, Spyros Acebos!" he cried. "At last! Put him on. Put on that heartbreaker, that nervous-breakdown-maker, Danny Ocean, Operator!"

As Mushy philosophically gathered up the debris of his card castle he watched Acebos' high elation vanish. The swarthy man's agitated delight collapsed into a dubious wariness.

"Yes, yes, this is Acebos, I told you," he said into the phone. "Yes, I'll accept the call." To Mushy he said sourly: "It ain't Ocean. It ain't even Phoenix. It's Corneal, calling from San Francisco."

"About Bergdorf." Mushy O'Conners nodded. "I told you he'd fix it with Tony, didn't I?"

"He'd better have it fixed," Spyros growled. "One more aggravation and I'll—Hello, hello? Yes, Corneal, I can hear you."

There was a pause during which Mushy heard the grate of a hard voice in the receiver held loosely at Spyros' ear. He could not distinguish the words but they sounded urgent. The former fighter kept his eyes on the boss: there had been times when urgent telephone calls had demanded Mushy's immediate interference to keep the boss from tearing the phone out by the roots and throwing it through the nearest window, and Mushy didn't want those sliding glass panels to the lanai busted before he could reach Acebos.

Mushy noted the familiar signs. Spyros' color mounted, then receded as though a plug had been pulled. The smaller, pudgier man began to breathe heavily. His neck thickened. His eyes began to bulge.

O'Conners left off shuffling his cards. The boss would need help, and soon.

The boss did. The harsh voice was still grating in the receiver when Spyros Acebos gave vent to a high-pitched *Aiiiiiii!* Thereupon he dropped the telephone to the thick carpeting with a thud, turned and staggered toward his chair, a hand clasped to his forehead.

"Aiiiiii!" he cried again. "This is too much. He's in prison."

"Who?" Mushy asked, recovering the telephone from the floor. He hung up the receiver: there was no sense keeping the connection open because it was a long distance call, reverse charges, and Mr. Acebos wouldn't be able to talk straight for a long time. "Who's in the can?" he asked Spyros again.

"The electrician," Spyros Acebos groaned. "The man everything depends on. *Our master electrician is doing one to five in San Quentin."*

At the other end of the line Roger Corneal looked at the telephone in his hand, shrugged, and hung up. To the man behind the counter of the littered TV repair shop he said: “We got cut off, looks like.”

“Seems to me I heard some screaming at the other end, even from here,” the proprietor said. “Anything wrong?”

“Well, he was a good friend of Tony’s,” Roger explained. “The news hit him hard.”

It had hit Roger Corneal hard, too, although he let his face show nothing to this guy, Raoul A. Garrabrandt, according to the sign on the window. This appeared to be more than a slight hitch in plans: there was something pretty permanent about one to five in Q. Corneal wondered if Danny Ocean was slipping: he should have known something about such a decisive development in the affairs of a man who, so far as Corneal knew, was a kingpin in the whole operation.

He shoved his wide-brimmed hat on the back of his head, stuck a cigarette in his crooked mouth and put a look of utter unconcern on his sun-baked face. Roger Corneal looked like, and had been, a circus pitchman in his day. When the circus with which he had spent all his adult life, except for the war years, went out of the canvas, Corneal was left without a home or a profession. Oh, yes, there were smaller circuses, some of them posing as three-sheet, but somehow Corneal could not bring himself to transfer his arts to another midway. He had found it impossible to blunt the pride he had always taken in himself in being part of the biggest and the best. Only clydes played it for place.

The soul that dwelt within the tall, thin frame garbed by the too-checked suit contained Roger Corneal’s great dream to someday come into enough money to buy a circus of his own, a show that would be bigger and better than all the circuses that had ever rolled. Until recently he had admitted, at least subconsciously, that this could never be more than a dream. Then Danny Ocean had contacted him and now—well, a man couldn’t help but believe that what Danny Ocean promised would come true.

“Thanks, Mr. Garrabrandt,” he said to the man behind the counter. “Thanks a lot for your information.”

“Y’welcome. Hope you can find the wife okay.”

“It shouldn’t be too tough. I wouldn’t think there were many joints like hers in the yellow pages even if she’s not using her right name.” Rog Corneal flipped a broad hand in a half salute and started out of the shop. At the door he collided with two small boys trying to slip in. Garrabrandt, the TV repairman, spotted the kids and loosed a howl.

“Out, I said! Go cross the street against the lights!”

The boys muttered something disrespectful and turned back.

Corneal closed the door behind him and grinned down at the youngsters. “Why don’t you fellas go sneak in a movie?” he suggested. “There must be a neighborhood house around here somewheres with a side exit, isn’t there?”

They stared up at him, uncomprehending. Corneal sighed sadly. Another tradition shot to hell by TV. It was responsible for half the ills of modern civilization. Corneal didn’t know the particulars but he was willing to bet that if Tony Bergdorf hadn’t gotten mixed up with television, even as a repairman, he wouldn’t be in Quent right now when Danny Ocean needed him.

When he had arrived in San Francisco, Corneal had paused only long enough to check into a hotel, change his suit to one almost identical to that which he had worn on the plane down from L.A., put on a tie with a little bolder design, and hop a cab for the address Danny had given him, the TV repair shop where Tony Bergdorf was supposed to be.

The name RAOUL A. GARRABRANDT on the shop window had not dismayed him: in Corneal’s set men often liked a variety of names to use. He reasoned that Tony might have a side line of hot TV tubes going for him and needed a “flag” to paint on the window of the shop he ran. True, the handle RAOUL A. GARRABRANDT was a little out of the ordinary but Tony always had been an unusual guy, very deep or something.

When he had entered the shop he had first thought it empty, even though a twenty-two-inch floor sample was showing an electric-chair execution with the volume turned up high, heavy on the ominous drumbeat and the organ’s eerie string accompaniment.

“Betcha he crushes outta there,” he heard, under the thunderous music.

“Betcha he don’t,” returned another voice. “Betcha his wife gets caught with that gun or maybe the gov’nor gives him a pardon, instead.”

“Bet,” said the first voice.

“Bet,” said the second.

Roger Corneal had craned his angular length until he had located the speakers. They were two little boys, about eight and ten, sitting cross-legged on the floor just far enough from the console TV to be able to take in the whole screen without turning their heads from down left to down right. Both wore the rapt expressions of small children about to witness horror.

Corneal had looked at the picture. The stage priest was pronouncing

the last absolution or something and to Roger it didn't look as though the poor slob in Old Smoky had a chance. He never did find out whether the wife got past the gate with the gun, the governor came through with a pardon, the condemned man somehow reversed the big charge so that the real villain, the crooked cop, got it instead of him, or what. At that moment there had come a high-pitched complaint from the man coming through a rear door.

"Again," cried the man. "How many times do I haveta?"

The man had advanced upon the two boys and gripped each by the scruff, yanked them to their feet and propelled them toward the door.

"It ain't enough we got crime all night, now they got to show it in the afternoon, too?" he had agonized the while. "Out! Out!"

The door had slammed open and the two little ones had been pitched outside. "Go play in alleys or find a pool hall where you won't learn bad things," the man had told them. "Out!"

The door had crashed shut with a jangle of the customer bell and the thickset man had turned to Roger Corneal.

"Them kids," he had told the ex-pitchman. "If I was a butcher, maybe, would they be settin' in my shop eatin' pork chops all day? You can't get 'em outta here, even to go to school, hardly. Except when there's a delivery, something light they could carry, a tube, a little switch—then just try and find 'em."

He had adjusted his best expert TV repair look. "Something I can do for you, sir?" he asked.

Roger Corneal glanced past the man at a framed photograph that hung on the back wall just over the cash register. It was the old platoon, so he was in the right place.

"I'm looking for Tony Bergdorf," he said.

A shutter had swiftly descended over the other's face. "Not here."

"But I thought he owned this shop," Corneal had said.

"Not any more." The thickset man had started to turn away, then paused and asked: "Just what's your interest in him, mister?"

Corneal leaned over the counter, stretched out a long arm and unhooked the framed photograph. "I'm just looking for him, that's all," he said. He stabbed the dusty glass with a forefinger. "That's him, Tony. That's me, two down from Bergdorf. We're old—you should pardon the expression—buddies."

Garrabrandt had thumbed the side of his jaw dubiously.

"We served in the Eighty-second Airborne together," Corneal prompted. "My name's Corneal, Roger Corneal. Maybe you've heard Tony mention me."

Garrabrandt shook his head. "No," he said. "I—uh—I'm afraid I got

something to tell you about Bergdorf that ain't very nice to hear."

A chill had struck Corneal. Tony never had been the strongest-looking guy in the platoon. Was he dead?

"He's in prison," Garrabrandt said.

"Prison?" The question had been jolted out of Corneal. Tony in the can; old Tony who hardly ever cut a corner in the Army, where cutting corners was about the only way to get along?

"San Quentin." Garrabrandt nodded. "He—well, he got mixed up in something connected with puttin' a gimmick on somebody's burglar alarm. I understand they gave him one to five. I don't know much about it. I never met him, matter of fact: I bought this business offen his wife."

"He's got a wife around?" Corneal had asked. "You know where I could find her?"

Garrabrandt thumbed his jaw again. "I dunno exactly," he said after a long pause, "but I understand she's runnin' a poodle-clippin' service somewheres in town."

"A what?"

"A poodle-clippin' service," the man behind the counter said making snipping motions with his first and second fingers. "You know; they take these here poodles, and trim the hell outta them, make them look like nothin' human. Wimmen go for 'em, but me, I'll take a real dog any time. Nothin' like a mutt, I say, for real loyalty. Smart, too. When I was a kid I had a mutt that—"

"I'm sure," Corneal broke in. "D'you mind if I use your phone for a long-distance call? I'll reverse the charges, of course."

"Go ahead," Garrabrandt had said. "Be my guest. Only you don't mind if I stick around and make sure you don't forget to reverse the charges, do you?"

There had followed the call to Spyros Acebos with the results already recounted. Now Corneal headed back to his hotel and a rundown of the establishments in San Francisco that catered to the owners of poodles who wanted their pets to look like nothing human.

He found Tony Bergdorf's wife at his second stop, Koenig's Klipping Korner, and she turned out to be a looker. Lush was a good word for her; her curved excellence was visible even under the dark blue smock she wore, and although she was carrying a miniature poodle, one black, one apricot, under each arm when Corneal walked into the shop.

At the moment Roger was not sure this was Bergdorf's prison widow but he hoped for Tony's sake that it was. This would be very nice to

come home to after a stretch in Q., although it probably would be tough to think of all this stuff walking around untended during the long nights in the cell lock when even ugly, scrawny broads were beautiful in a con's memory.

He had to wait while the proprietress handed the two poodles to the overdressed battle ax who had called for them. He also had to listen to the customer enthuse.

"Thank you, dear Miss Koenig," the old girl gushed. "Don't the little dears look precious?" She lowered her wattles to each poodle in turn and made strange cooing noises, then raised her bedizened face again. "Mr. Allenby will be *so* pleased. They're our very own children, you know."

Corneal decided he wouldn't like Mr. Allenby much, either. He watched the old bag sweep out of the shop, toting her poodles, and felt brief sympathy for the dogs.

The iron-corseted stern of Mrs. Allenby had not quite gotten through the doorway and Corneal was beginning to make his move toward the woman in the blue smock when a small boy entered carrying a large dog in both arms. The boy was the spitting image of Tony and the dog just might have been a white standard poodle once. Both child and dog were very dirty. At the woman's cry Corneal told himself that this was his day for watching parents come in second.

"Peter!" the dark-eyed, dark-haired woman exclaimed. "Just look at you! Where on earth have you been?"

The boy and the big poodle grinned at Corneal before the child answered his mother. "Aw, me and him"—with a nod toward the happy, tongue-lolling dog in his arms—"we kind of stopped to play." His big eyes returned to Corneal. "Got in a fight, too," he announced. "Buff kicked the bejeezus outta a Airedale."

"Honestly," gasped the woman in the smock, and reached for boy and dog. She pushed the two culprits toward the door from which she had emerged carrying Mrs. Allenby's two very own precious children, and cried: "Ellen, take care of Peter and Buff. Clean them up—Peter first."

A hand reached out to snatch Peter and Buff into the back room and the brunette turned toward Roger Corneal, striving for composure. She looked at and beyond the lanky man, trying to find the canine customer. "Yes?" she asked tentatively when she saw there was none.

"Mrs. Bergdorf?" Corneal asked.

A hesitation and then a slight nod, a chilling of the eyes. "I'm Bernice Bergdorf," she acknowledged.

"I'm a friend of Tony's," Roger said, using his warmest, you'll-love-

me-when-you-get-to-know-me smile. “Roger Corneal. We were together in the—”

“I know,” the woman broke in frostily. “I’ve heard of you. I’ve heard of all of you, Lieutenant Jimmy Foster and Mushy O’Conners and the sergeant with the strange name.”

“Danny Ocean,” Corneal supplied. “Matter of fact, that’s why I’m looking up Tony. Danny asked me to get in touch with him.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Corneal, but you won’t find my husband here,” the woman said. There was no friendliness in her voice, no appreciation of Corneal’s proffered charm in her fine eyes.

“I heard about the—bad luck,” Roger said.

She sniffed. “Bad luck? I call it something different. Something not quite so generous.”

Roger shrugged and spread his spatulate hands. “So Tony took a fall,” he said. “So a lot of good men have—”

“Look, Mr. Corneal, you may have been in the wonderful Eighty-second Airborne with my husband but you won’t be having any reunions with him *here,* I promise you,” Bernice Bergdorf said. “My husband has been ordered by the court to stay away from Peter and me.”

Corneal repressed his immediate retort, kept his smile even. “I just wanted to ask you if you knew the visiting hours at Q—San Quentin,” he said smoothly. “I’d like to pay old Tony a visit, that’s all.”

The woman turned to leave. “I suggest you wait and see him when he gets out,” she said harshly.

“Well, I’d sure like to,” Corneal said, “but I’m going to be a little busy the next couple of years.”

Bernice Bergdorf let her voice drift back over her shoulder. “You won’t have to wait a couple of years, Mr. Corneal. Tony gets out tomorrow. Now, if you’ll pardon me, I’m terribly busy.”

The back-room door closed behind her as Roger goggled. So Danny Ocean was not slipping, after all. Danny had known right along that Tony was in stir and that he was getting out tomorrow. Trust the sergeant to know, and depend on him, too, to keep it to himself.

A kind of weirdie, like, Danny Ocean. He hated to give away any part of himself, even information that might make a job a little easier on his friends.

If he had any friends. Of course he hung out with the lieutenant all the time and he was supposed to be bunghole buddies with the piano man, his old bazooka teammate, Sam Harmon, but Roger Corneal didn’t think that either Foster or Harmon was really Danny Ocean’s friend.

He don't want a friend, the pitchman told himself. *He don't want anybody except that wife of his, that Bea. And her he can't have. That one he blew.*

3

Danny Ocean drained his drink and reached for the Jack Daniel's bottle. As he emptied six ounces into the glass, Jimmy Foster raised his head and eyed the sergeant from above crossed forearms. Foster was getting yet another massage from Delores. This time the blonde was not dressed for the job as fittingly as she had been in her Capris, when Danny had first seen her. Now she wore a green evening sheath, hiked well up on her full thighs to permit her to straddle Foster and cut so low that when she bent over the man to manipulate his muscles her upper structure fell almost completely free.

And a very nice upper structure she had, too, Ocean decided as he viewed the blonde over the rim of the glass.

He caught Foster's speculative gaze and gulped defiantly. Okay, so he was plastered, stoned. He needed to be. After six sessions with Helen, so closely timed that they could be called one long session with brief intermissions, a guy needed to be plastered. Not for reasons of alcoholic libido or stamina: Danny Ocean never needed artificial means of summoning either. But a man might get drunk enough to forget some of the things that had transpired in the bedroom beyond the closed door: he might drink enough to banish the persistent half-vision of Bea, her nose crinkled in distaste.

He might, but Danny had not been able to drink enough yet either to forget or banish a damned thing.

He finished his drink in three applications and swung his head toward Foster. "I'm waitin', Lieutenant," he said.

"Waiting?"

"For you to say how about takin' it easy, Danny-boy? For you to remind me there's still a lot to be done." Ocean's voice was neither slurred nor ultra-careful; he had been drinking steadily since his return from the Arizona Club nearly twenty-four hours earlier and yet one who did not know him well could never have told from his speech, his walk, or his visible reflexes that he was in the bag.

Foster shook his head. "You ought to know me better than that, Danny," he said quietly. "When did I appoint myself your proctor?"

"What's a proctor?" Delores asked. She leaned forward on her hands, somewhat like a person who had become wearied in trying to revive a drowned man by the old-fashioned artificial-respiration method. A lock of hair fell over her eye and Danny Ocean decided she

had quite a Marilyn Monroe look. Especially below the chin.

"A proctor's a hired conscience, included in your tuition," Jimmy explained lazily. "There's a place just under my left shoulder blade—"

Delores sat upright and dealt Foster's bare shoulder a stinging slap. "F'crissake, don't you ever get enough of this damn massage business?" she cried. "Ever since I first laid eyes on you, you been havin' me pound on your damn back. How about doin' somethin' for me once in a while?"

"My dear girl," Foster murmured.

Delores grinned. She brushed the lock of hair back from her eye and asked Danny: "Is Helen still in the sack?"

Ocean nodded, flicked a glance toward the closed bedroom door. He remembered then that he had promised the brunette that he was leaving her only to get another drink. That had been at least a half-hour and three drinks ago, but the lack of outraged complaint from the bedroom indicated that Helen slept, despite herself.

"What're we gonna do tonight?" Delores asked. "We goin' places?"

"Oh, undoubtedly," Foster said. "Now if you'll just get that spot under the left shoulder blade, precious …"

"Not until I get me a drinkie," Delores announced. She came off the couch with a flash of high-thigh white and headed for the bar. Ocean stood aside to let her mix her awful bourbon and ginger ale.

"What'll we hit tonight?" Danny asked Foster. "What's the liveliest joint in this town or have we been there already and I didn't know it was supposed to be good?"

"This is Phoenix, remember, not Vegas," Foster said. "We might try the—"

The phone shrilled doggedly. It had been ringing every twenty minutes, night and day, since they had checked into this place, refusing to acknowledge defeat.

"Y'want me to answer that?" Delores asked hopefully.

"Let it ring," Danny grunted.

"Well, okay, but it'll wake up Helen," the blonde said, and giggled.

Ocean moved swiftly to the telephone while Delores laughed. As he raised the phone, Danny whipped a handkerchief from a hip pocket and covered the mouthpiece. When he spoke, his voice was an exact duplication of Jimmy Foster's.

Delores' eyes popped but the man on the couch did not open his eyes: Jimmy knew all about Danny's impersonations.

"Hello," Ocean said. "Jimmy Foster here. Are you there?"

"Los Angeles is calling Mr. Danny Ocean. Is this Mr. Ocean?"

"This is Mr. Foster. May I take the call?"

"Yes, yes," came Spyros Acebos' cry over the line from Beverly Hills. "Operator, him I want to talk to even worse than that Ocean."

"Mr. Acebos," the operator recited implacably, "I have Mr. Foster on the line. Not Mr. Ocean. Do you wish—"

"Listen, forty thousand times I told you, I'd be most delighted to speak with Mr. Foster," Acebos wailed. "Don't play games with me, please! Put him on. Jimmy? Jimmy?"

"Ah, Mr. Acebos," Danny said in Foster's near-British accent. "Nice to hear from you, sir."

"Listen, I—"

"Go ahead, Mr. Foster," the operator cut in ruthlessly. "I have Mr. Acebos on the line from Los Angeles. Go ahead, please, Mr. Acebos."

There was a moment's dead silence and then Spyros said weakly: "Thank you, Operator. Thank you very much."

"Are you there?" Danny asked anxiously. "Hello, hello? Have we been cut off?"

"No!"

"Your party is on the line, Mr, Acebos," the operator chanted. "Go ahead, please."

"Hello, Jimmy?" It was like a shriek from the pit.

"I'm on," Danny said. "Nice to hear from you, I said."

"Nice?" Spyros spluttered in Beverly Hills. "Nice, he says! D'you know I've been trying to get you for four days? Four days, and all I've been hearing is 'Mr. Ocean is not there, he don't answer,' or 'Mr. Foster is out, he will call you back.' Four days of this. It's enough to give a man another ulcer, Jimmy. You should have pity."

"So sorry," Danny said through the handkerchief. "We've been up and about, Danny and I. You have no idea of the delicacy with which these things have to be handled." He paused and added fiendishly: "Or will have to be handled, once we begin working."

There was a gasp, then a moan, at the other end of the line. "How can you do this to me?" Spyros agonized. "You, I relied on. I had confidence in you. From the other one I knew what to expect. He's hopeless, undisciplined. That's why I sent you with him and now you tell me you haven't even started."

Danny Ocean grinned into the telephone and then removed the wadded handkerchief. When he spoke again it was in his own voice.

"Hiyah, Spyros," he said jauntily. "How you doin'?"

"Who," Acebos asked fearfully, "is this?"

"It's the hopeless, undisciplined guy you knew what to expect

from." Ocean laughed. He switched to Foster's accent abruptly. "You really should know my voice by now, old boy."

There were sounds of strangulation in the receiver. "You!" Spyros screamed. "Get away from the phone. I won't talk to you. All you know is to give me heartache and aggravation."

Danny dropped into a chair, thrust his feet out in front of him, relaxed in comfort. Adding points to Spyros Acebos' systolic count always eased Ocean's own inner uncertainties, no matter that at times it was comparable to shooting staked-out game.

"I know you love me," he said now. "You don't have to keep saying it, Spyros."

"Love you! Love *you?* Hah! Like an adder in the bosom I love you, Danny Ocean."

"Now, now, don't keep saying things like that. I'm only human. You'll give me a swelled head." He cut through Acebos' sizzling with his next question: "Has Sam Harmon showed up yet?"

"No," Acebos answered. "I sent Curly Steffens to the airport to get him. He won't come, anyway—who would fly across the Pacific just because Danny Ocean said come? But I have Curly at the airport with my new Bentley, for God's sake, to welcome him, the no-good heel, he wouldn't answer a friend's call for assistance in time of need."

"He'll answer," Danny said comfortably. "Bet on it. Say, Spyros, I got some news for you. Some good news and some not so good."

The spluttering resumed. "Don't tell me the not-so-good! Bad news I got plenty, all I want. Did you know, perhaps, your fine electrician friend, Mr. Tony Bergdorf, is in San Quentin Prison on a five-year knock?"

"Sure," Ocean said easily. "He'll be out tomorrow on a Christmas amnesty unless he fouls up tonight, which knowin' Tony, ain't likely. What else is new?"

"You knew about Bergdorf and still you let me send Corneal to San Francisco without saying a word?" Stark outrage.

"I knew Rog would find it out when he got there," Ocean said. "If you lay it all out for these guys they fluff off, thinkin' it's errand-boy stuff. Give 'em a little work to do and they get real proud of their mission. Psychology, Spyros, elementary psychology."

"Your kind of psychology I can do without," Acebos said sourly. "What's your good news?"

"We're leavin' Phoenix right away," Danny said.

There was a delighted shout at the Beverly Hills end of the line.

"Darling," Spyros cried. "That's wonderful! Why didn't you tell me in the first place? So what can be bad? Tell me—what's the not-so-

good news?"

"We're goin' to Salt Lake," Danny Ocean said. "You'll be hearin' from us. Maybe."

He gently replaced the phone in its cradle to choke off Acebos' lamentations and handed the instrument to Delores, who put it on the bar. The blonde wrinkled her forehead and said:

"You were just kiddin' about leavin' here, weren't you, Danny? I mean, you didn't really mean it, did you? You were just kiddin'?"

"I'm afraid I meant it, chick," Ocean said. "We've got responsibilities, you know."

"Responsibilities? When you haven't even answered the telephone for four days runnin'? You call that responsibilities?"

"Ah, but he's been thinking, you see," Jimmy Foster put in from the couch. "Didn't you know that more time is wasted on the long-distance telephone lines of our great nation than in pool halls? Our Mr. Ocean never touches a telephone unless he has vital information to impart. Succinct is the name for our Danny."

Delores shook her pretty head. "I don't dig," she confessed. "You callin' Danny somethin' weird? He's not off the beam, from what Helen tells me. He's got—"

"Hold it!" Ocean barked. "I'm a naturally modest guy, doll." To Foster he said: "You'd better start puttin' on a shirt, Lieutenant. Your Phoenix massages are over."

Jimmy sighed, swung his feet down to the floor. "And just when she was getting the touch," he mourned. He eyed the door behind which lay Helen and grinned at Danny. "Are you sure this isn't a retreat instead of a rearward action to take up prescribed positions?" he asked.

"Did you ask General Bradley why we moved from here to there?" Ocean asked. He eyed the bedroom door and then the Jack Daniel's bottle, shook his head, moved toward the room where the brunette waited.

"Virtute et armis," Jimmy Foster murmured as he watched Danny go into the bedroom.

By valor and arms—somehow it seemed a fitting motto.

4

Danny Ocean had told Spyros Acebos that Sam Harmon would be on the plane from Honolulu and he was. If closely questioned he might not have been able to explain why, but there he was, in his beautiful gray silk suit, his wide-brimmed hand-woven panama, his Italian loafers, his dark good looks, his crooked smile, standing there at the

top of the steps that jackknifed out of the transpacific air liner when Curly Steffens broke through the crowd, late as usual.

Curly waved wildly but Sam was busy completing the stewardess' happiness so Spyros Acebos' chauffeur had time to study the young man, this closest friend of Danny Ocean, and to marvel.

The years that had made Curly's nickname a travesty and added the waistline pounds to Steffens' chunky body (too big these days to cram into the cockpit of one of the racing cars he used to drive at Indianapolis) had treated Sam Harmon as gently as Sam himself treated the world. Even from this distance, Steffens could tell that Harmon had not aged one day from the time when he was one of Lieutenant Jimmy Foster's platoon in the old Eighty-second Airborne. The fact that Harmon took his exercise at the keyboard of a piano, playing *intime* saloons, that he drank too much, slept too little, ate too irregularly and never stopped smoking, meant nothing: his tanned face, spring-steel frame, proclaimed the perfect specimen.

Sam was good-looking, Curly told himself as he waited, but he was more than that. A nice guy, all the way through. There were so few all-nice guys in the world, men who didn't have at least one ass-griping thing about them, that when you met one you hung onto him; sometimes just knowing him was the one thing that kept you from going sour on the whole damn world.

Not that Sam Harmon let a guy hang onto him much. Oh, he didn't give anybody the brushoff—he liked, or made out he liked, practically everybody he met. But he drifted here and there, in and out of a person's reach, playing his piano, singing his songs in his careless baritone, never reduced to the crumb joints but never hitting the top spots, the TV guest appearances, either. What was it Leo Durocher said about nice guys?

Curly wondered if Sam Harmon really wanted the big dough, the top spot. Maybe if he really wanted it he could have gotten there. Curly admitted he didn't know much about music but to him Sam Harmon's playing and singing were the very best. Curly knew enough about life, and particularly the entertainment world, to know that a fellow had to have something tough and hard in his make-up to get right up front; otherwise the guys who had that tough, hard quality elbowed you aside, out of the spotlight. And Sam Harmon had never been able to stomp on another guy's fingers, going up a ladder rung; that was his trouble.

Oh, he had plenty of guts if you called guts the ability to fight. Curly had seen him fight with weapons and fists, and Curly wanted no part of the other side going up against Sam Harmon. Wasn't he with the sarge with the bazooka out front of everybody else all the time—

you couldn't play Bank Night with kraut vaults, with the enemy balls deep around you, without having guts.

Curly Steffens wondered briefly how Sam Harmon had made out in his bazooka deal with the sarge. Somebody said (yeah, that old Somebody you could never back into a corner and make prove it) that Danny mooched Sam out of something like a hundred thousand bucks. But that must be the crap: Danny wouldn't treat Sam Harmon that way. Him, Curly Steffens, Danny might be tempted to stab right up the crack and break it off, if he had to—like he'd expect to get it the same way if he didn't look out—but not Sam Harmon.

Sam was too nice a guy. He could fight, sure, but ninety-nine times out of ten (that had been Smiley Yelenski's pet saying and the last Curly ever saw of Smiley was the poor dumb bastard dangling from a hedgerow with every kraut burp gun in forty miles zero'ed in on him) Sam Harmon could smooth over the rumble, no matter how bad, and leave everybody friends with everybody else, they didn't know how come they got so sociable all of a sudden.

Even in that dirty war and in a rugged outfit like the Eighty-second Airborne, Sam had made things a lot easier on a guy, the way he had of getting you to laugh, no matter how cruddy things got.

So what was a nice guy doing in this deal? So Danny Ocean was superstitious about Sam, that's why he'd called him all the way from Hawaii. The sarge would never admit it but Sam was Danny's luck in anything big, and God knew this was big enough. Ocean had to have Harmon in on this one or he wouldn't move, or if he did he'd know it wasn't going to come through for him; it would be the six-one on the second roll, the spade specker right in the middle of a heart-flush draw.

As far as he, Curly Steffens, was concerned, if Sam Harmon didn't come in on this, he wouldn't be in on it, either. And a lot of other guys, Lou Jackson and Rog Corneal and Pete Rheimer—they'd cut out, too, if Sam wasn't in on it. They all remembered the time old Sam was away from the platoon, getting over the banging around he got that time Danny saved his life. Jesus, the platoon sure got ripped up and down the middle, those couple of days Sam Harmon wasn't with Danny Ocean.

Curly Steffens looked out at the straight, handsome figure at the top of the landing stage and muttered: "You better be with us, Sambo. You better come in when you hear the deal, no matter how you feel about the Ten Commandments and all that, because I need the million bucks. Jesus, Sam, I need that million bucks so bad I'd hold a gun to your neck to *make* you come in, if I had to."

“I’m awfully glad you enjoyed the flight, Mr. Harmon,” the stewardess was saying. She sounded as though she meant it: certainly the smile she wore was warmer than her professional there’s-a-little-turbulence-ahead manner called for. Something a lot more personal, even wistful over the fact that today’s planes traveled so fast and got there so soon.

“With somebody like you aboard, they ought to raise the rates,” Sam said. “I mean it.”

“Mis-ter Harmon,” the stewardess said, and came as close to a simper as a properly trained air-line hostess could. “But I did mean it when I said I adored your playing at The Wahini.”

“You”—Harmon smiled—“tell that to all the broken-down piano players you fly in from Honolulu. Take care.”

He descended the steps, searching the crowd at the fence beyond which non-passengers must not pass on pain of something dreadful, looking for Danny Ocean, the wild man who had called him from Hawaii. A wild man with a wild message—had Danny flipped? Did he really think a crazy idea like that could be put over or was the whole bit some joke so involved that Ocean could go for the price of the plane fare between Honolulu and L.A.?

No Danny Ocean. That fat boy who was windmilling his stubby arms so energetically looked faintly familiar. Harmon headed in his direction.

“Sambo! Sam Harmon!” the fat man cried, descending upon him. He seized Harmon’s hand in both of his and began pumping frenziedly. “Old Sambo!”

“That takes care of me.” Harmon nodded. “Now how about you?”

The shorter man gazed up at Harmon reproachfully. “George Steffens,” he said. As though to clinch the identification he swept off his hat to reveal a shining dome. “*Curly* Steffens, Sam.”

Harmon gave a yelp of genuine consternation. “Curly! What happened to that beautiful hair?”

The fat man shrugged. “So who needs hair in a warm climate?” he asked. “C’mon, I’ve got the classiest car you ever planted your tokus in waitin’.”

“Big enough to take my luggage in with us or should I have the express company—”

“Plenty big,” Curly broke in. “Wait’ll you see this heap. A Bentley. You ever ride in a Bentley, Sam?”

“It’s really nothing more than a poor man’s Rolls.” Sam sniffed. “But nice of ’em to send you down with this heap to collect me.”

“Danny left instructions you’re to be took to his hotel. He ain’t there right now but he said you was to make yourself right at home. He’s

got a swell layout, Sam. Like always."

Harmon nodded. "Like always. But how about taking me to this Acebos character first? I want to meet him." He slowed his pace to accommodate Steffens' puffing waddle, and asked: "Danny's really going through with this?"

"All the way," Steffens said. "It can't miss, the way Acebos and Danny tell it, and with you in on it."

They reached the baggage counter where the small throng clamored for attention, leaning dangerously far out over the shelf to point out their luggage, their unaccountable frenzy mounting as though they feared their belongings might turn radioactive if not reclaimed within the next ten seconds.

Harmon watched them with his crooked smile and said to Steffens: "I read somewhere the other day that back in seventeen hundred a guy could miss a stagecoach and wait two weeks for the next one with no sweat—now a man burns when he can't get the first space in a revolving door."

Curly chuckled. "Yeah, it's this here high tempo. Anything goes wrong with a guy now, from athalete's foot to a knocked-up broad, he blames it on the high tempo. Didn't nobody have anything wrong with them when we had low tempo, I wonder?"

"Of course not. Haven't you ever had an old-timer beat you with the when-I-was-a-boy routine? Nickel beer and roast beef on the free lunch every day—what could go wrong?"

"I guess." The fat man sighed. "Maybe back then even this character Acebos didn't have nervous breakdowns all the time, huh?"

The crowd, their frenetic demands fulfilled, thinned, and Harmon moved up to the counter. "Who is this guy, Acebos, anyway?" he asked.

Steffens moved closer and lowered his voice. "Used to be a real big wheel until Internal Revenue moved in. Since then he ain't been so much in the limelight, y'might say, but he gets around."

"Is he still in the dough?"

Steffens nodded. "Would you believe it? And after a space in Leavenworth."

Harmon said: "And I suppose he dreamed this whole thing up in stir."

"Well, yeah," Curly admitted, "but not how to do it. Danny and the lieutenant figured that out."

An attendant took Sam's baggage check and Harmon turned back to the dumpy man. "Where did Danny run into this guy?"

A shrug. "Who knows? A race track, a night spot, a Turkish bath,

somebody's bedroom."

"Danny's still on the big spin, huh?" Harmon sighed.

"Worse than ever, Sambo," Steffens said with wrinkled forehead. "I dunno how the guy stands it. He ain't no kid any more, like you and me ain't, but he goes like they'll disqualify him if he even slows up on the S turns. Horses, the tables, the booze. And the wimmen, accourse, always the wimmen."

The baggage attendant seemed to be having trouble finding Sam's baggage among the luggage still in the racks. Harmon watched him patiently and asked over his shoulder:

"How's Bea standing it? Pretty rough on her, is it?"

Curly paused a long moment before he said in a low voice: "I guess you ain't heard, out there in Hawaii. It's for sure Danny'd never tell you. Bea left him, Sam. They're still Mister and Missus but they ain't livin' together. After all this time takin' it, she just ups and moves out on him. Been six months or more."

"No kidding." Harmon's voice was a blank. After a while he asked: "How's Danny taking it?"

"Oh, hard. He don't wave no torch, y'understand, but it goes very tough with our Danny. You can tell, even if he does everything he knows how to try to keep you from seein'."

The baggage attendant came to the counter carrying one tiny P.A.A. satchel. "I'm sorry, sir," he said, "but the rest of your things don't seem to be here. Maybe they're coming in on the next flight."

"I'll split with you on anything that does." Harmon laughed. He picked up the little blue bag, turned to a lurking redcap.

"Take my luggage out to my Bentley, please," he said. "And don't bend the socks; they're my last pair."

5

Spyros Acebos was on the telephone when Curly led Sam into that impossible Beverly Hills living room. Harmon gazed about him at the conglomerate splendor and repressed comment. He braced himself as Mushy O'Conners abandoned his latest house of cards and avalanched on him.

"Sambo!" he bellowed. "Old Sam—you're lookin' great, boy!"

Acebos turned a distressed face toward his bodyguard. "Please," he implored, "I can't hear, and this is costing money, charges reversed like always."

He turned back to the phone. "Hello, Corneal? You say he's getting loose tomorrow? Thank God for little blessings. You should make sure

he don't run a red light or something before we get him out of harm's way, Roger. Don't fail to convince him how much he is needed. Tell him—tell him"—Harmon saw the pudgy man at the telephone swallow mightily—"Danny Ocean is depending on him. Don't ask me why, but those seem to be the magic words."

He made a brief, toll-saving good-by and hung up, turned toward Harmon, and came across the room to the man from Honolulu, his hand outstretched. "Welcome, my dear Mr. Harmon," he said. "Please avail yourself of my hospitality, by all means. What will you have to drink?"

Sam's dark eyes ran up and down the rumpled figure of this man whose prison-cell cogitations had started a chain of events that had landed him, Harmon, in this ridiculous room surrounded by these fairly ridiculous people. The pianist withheld immediate judgment: he had learned through the years that first impressions almost never meant a thing.

"Thank you," he said after the pause. "Some Scotch wouldn't go bad at all."

"Scotch you shall have, the best," Acebos said grandly. He reached a hand toward Harmon's elbow. Sam imperceptibly twitched off the other's clasp, not from any particular personal dislike of Spyros but because he did not like to be touched by other men. Acebos kept his guiding grip an inch from Harmon's elbow as he walked with Sam toward the pink-and-blue bar.

"That was Roger Corneal on the phone?" Sam asked as Mushy jammed his bulk behind the bar to mix a Scotch and water.

"Yes." Acebos nodded. "Another crisis lived through. Tony Bergdorf—you know of Tony, I suppose?"

Harmon said yes, he remembered Tony. "The only man in the U.S. Army who could gimmick a walkie-talkie so you could get the Ray Scott Quintet on the B.B.C.," he said reminiscently. "What's with Tony?"

"He's in San Quentin," Acebos explained, "but they're letting him out tomorrow, Corneal says. An amnesty."

Sam took the tall glass Mushy handed him and sipped experimentally. It was good Scotch, properly dusted with water. "What did Tony do?" he asked. "He's the last guy in the world I'd expect to find in the can."

Spyros shrugged. "What he did is not important. It is enough to know he is coming out tomorrow." He lost his pleasant host's manner abruptly and scowled. "Some joke," he said bitterly. "Another heart attack for Spyros Acebos, hearing that Bergdorf is in Q, and then it develops that he's coming out with an amnesty. That Danny Ocean!"

"Why blame Danny?" Harmon inquired mildly.

"Yeah, boss," Mushy put in. "Danny didn't have nothin' to do with sendin' Tony to the cage, did he?"

"That I would not swear he didn't," Acebos retorted, "but this I'm sure: Danny Ocean knew it all the time that Tony Bergdorf was going to be let out because of the amnesty tomorrow. How he knew this I would not dare to try to even guess, but he did—perhaps he got it from the governor or maybe even the President, for all I know. But would he tell his friend Spyros Acebos? No, he wanted me to have my nervous prostration when I heard Bergdorf was in Q. He just likes to eat my heart out. That Danny Ocean, he enjoys making me suffer."

"There's one thing, though, boss," Mushy said after Acebos lapsed into glum silence. "What's wrong with Tony? I mean, can they cure him?"

Spyros eyed his protean in complete bafflement but Sam Harmon remembered O'Conners of old.

"Amnesty means a sort of special pardon, Mushy," he explained. "They hand them out at Christmas when people get sentimental."

Spyros seemed to lose some of his gloom. "Sure, Mushy, this is the wonderful Yuletide season when everybody goes around being nice to people and never mind what you think of the lice the other fifty weeks of the year."

He actually smiled as he added: "This loving-kindness they build up till New Year's Eve, when they go positively crazy while the clock strikes twelve."

Sam Harmon applied himself to his drink. *Just how crazy do they go?*

A Chinese houseboy broke the silence with the sibilant announcement: "Mr. Whitney DeWolfe to see you, Mr. Acebos."

Spyros was jerked out of his calm into immediate concern. "Mr. Whitney DeWho?" he asked.

The houseboy had no chance to explain further. Around him came a very lean individual with a long, sharp nose and a receding chin. Harmon's first thought was that this Mr. Whitney DeWolfe looked like a Russian borzoi such as silent screen stars once used in stills, together with white fox scarves and long walking sticks. The newcomer's hand clutched a sheaf of legal-looking papers from which Spyros recoiled as though they writhed and flickered forked tongues.

"Whitney DeWolfe, Easy Finance Company, Mr. Acebos," he said briskly. "I got writs of attachment here to repossess your cars. All four of them."

Sam glanced across the room at Curly Steffens, the one who had labeled Spyros Acebos a wonder man who could still be loaded after a

stretch in Leavenworth. Curly looked properly abashed.

If everybody in the room was waiting for Spyros Acebos to explode, everybody was disappointed. The man beside Sam did not even emit a groan; instead, he reached a pudgy hand into a pocket and came out with a cluster of keys.

DeWolfe was nonplused. As Acebos proffered the keys, the ambassador of the Easy Finance Company drew back, affronted. What kind of deadbeat was this who surrendered at first salvo? Where was the angle in this operation?

"My writs are all in order, Mr. Acebos," DeWolfe said. "You can save both of us a lot of trouble and embarrassment if you—"

"Oh, I believe you, I believe you," Spyros said wearily. "I don't have to read your writs. Doesn't the spirit of Christmas mean anything to you?"

What lower jaw DeWolfe had, dropped. "Well, Easy throws the best office party of any finance company in Southern California, if that's what you mean," he offered.

"Does Joe Easy himself hand out the presents?" Sam asked curiously.

DeWolfe turned his wolfhound eyes on the man from Honolulu. "There is no Mr. Easy," he said, "but Mr. Hammersma, the district manager, gives a personalized notebook to every employee that's been with the company for three years or more."

"That's most encouraging," Spyros said dryly. He thrust the keys on DeWolfe. "Here, drive 'em away. No arguments, no fuss, no nothing. Just take them and stick them up Mr. Hammersma's—But no, it's Christmas. I shouldn't be so uncharitable."

DeWolfe looked at the keys, at the writs, at the ornate living room, at the pink-and-blue bar where Mushy O'Conners was making a card tower, and apparently decided he was in a madhouse. He fled without even giving Spyros the season's greetings.

Maybe this will change things, Sam Harmon told himself hopefully. *A man who's so hard up he loses his cars certainly can't believe he can swing a deal like the one Danny Ocean boxed around in his letter.*

He knew he was wrong in the next breath: Spyros Acebos was going ahead, Mr. DeWolfe notwithstanding.

"What're we gonna use for wheels?" Curly Steffens asked into the silence that had fallen.

Acebos gave a casual shrug. "Taxis," he said.

He turned to Sam as though there never had been an Easy Finance Company, a Bentley vanished along with three other fine cars.

"So how is it over there in Hawaii with the ukuleles?" he asked

pleasantly. “They say you work in night clubs, right?”

“Not night clubs,” Harmon corrected. “Small bars, maybe a couple of feet longer than yours.” He took a swallow of his Scotch and added: “Not half so pretty, though.”

Acebos gave the padded pink-and-blue monstrosity a cold glance. “You like that thing?” he asked. “To me it is something somebody had made to get people to stop drinking. But if you like it, it’s yours. You can take it back to Hawaii with you after everything’s over.”

He peered at Harmon, measuring him. “So you play piano in little bars. Well, everybody’s not cut out to be champion, maybe.”

“Look,” Curly Steffens put in, “as far as I’m concerned, Sam is champ. You oughta hear him play, Mr. Acebos. Van Cliburn, Joey Bushkin; they’re nothin’ side of Sambo. You ask Danny about Sam, Mr. Acebos.”

Spyros pursed his thick lips. “And do you suppose Ocean would tell me anything I wanted to know?” he asked. His dark eyes sought Sam’s. “I tell you frankly, Mr. Harmon, as a long-time personal friend of Danny Ocean’s I’m surprised you didn’t go straight to that fancy hotel suite he keeps, God knows how he can afford it.”

“Oh, I’ll make it after a while,” Sam said lightly.

Acebos nodded. “And you wanted to look me over first, is that it?” he asked.

Harmon smiled back at him.

“The undertaking is big and complicated and you have apprehensions, perhaps?” Spyros asked quietly.

Sam finished his drink, reached past Acebos to place his glass on the bar. He gave a headshake to Mushy’s inquiring glance and turned to Spyros. “More than apprehension. Say nightmares. I don’t know the details but from where I sit it looks as though you’re kidding yourselves about what you’re going up against. I know the place. I’ve worked for the people.”

Acebos abruptly dropped his harassed impotence. Suddenly his lined, hooded-eyed face was cold, feral. His voice was the hard clatter of rock grating on ice-coated cement. “Excuse me,” he said, “but on this subject we’re a little better informed, you know, from the inside. We know what we’re up against. We do not kid ourselves, Mr. Harmon, and we, too, know the place and the people and what we shall do with them.”

He jabbed at his chest with a thumb.

“You look at me, you think you see a stout, middle-aged man talking broken English, living in a big house furnished like a bad dream, in obviously strained financial circumstances. But have no

fears, Mr. Harmon, have no fears."

He pointed a stubby forefinger at Harmon's tie clasp and came within a hairbreadth of poking the man from Honolulu. Spyros had learned from Sam's shrugging off of his hand at the elbow and the finger did not make contact.

"This plan has reality," Acebos said slowly, earnestly. "We are not dreamers and we are not reckless fools, no matter what some may think. Everything about this has been thoroughly planned. When the time comes, everything will be ready; it will go off like clockwork, I promise you. We will not be stopped."

He remembered Danny Ocean then, and a spasm crossed the vulturine face, magically erasing the menace.

"Unless that madman in Arizona—no, Salt Lake—keeps doing things to me," he added.

As though that fleeting glimpse of ice and flint and total heartlessness had been a slip, a mistake, an illusion, the Greek worked hard at being the other, more familiar Spyros Acebos.

"Which reminds me," he told Sam, and grabbed up the phone and dialed Long Distance. "Hello, hello," he cried. "Long Distance? Operator Fifty-six, please." His eyes started from his head. "You say this *is* Operator Fifty-six? A miracle! It wouldn't happen again in a million years, having the operator that has charge of me answer the phone her own self. So what's with Salt Lake City, Operator Fifty-six?"

He listened, and his face sagged. "I see," he told the mouthpiece. "Well, keep trying to locate them. The fanciest hotel in Salt Lake City, that's where they'll be, I guarantee it."

He hung up and turned back to Sam Harmon. "You must be tired from your long journey," he told the pianist. "You'll want to go to Danny's hotel. I'll call you a taxi. Curly, go along to make sure Mr. Harmon gets settled all comfortable."

After Harmon and Steffens had left, Spyros lit one of his poisonous cigarettes and blew smoke toward the foyer through which the man from Honolulu had disappeared. He put Sam Harmon in brief, totally objective judgment and shook his heavy head decisively. "Harmon, I could do without," he told the room. "He is one of those men with high principles. He is a Boy Scout, a priest, in spite of the little saloons he plays piano in."

"But if I know Danny Ocean, Sam's in this or Danny ain't," Mushy said, concentrating on his house of cards. "With Danny, it's Sam or nothin' at all."

Spyros made an irritated gesture. "I know, I know, and it's useless to

try to tell Danny that this is a mistake. Mushy, what about this Harmon? Why must Danny bring him all the way from Hawaii? That Ocean is so secretive—is there something so special about this Sam Harmon?

"Well, he's Danny's closest friend, to start off with."

"Until everything is all of a sudden Harmon, Harmon, Harmon, I thought Jimmy Foster was Ocean's closest friend," Acebos complained. "Him I can take: he has flashes of good sense even though he is almost as much of a wild man as Danny Ocean most of the time. But now I find out that Foster is only the *second* best friend Ocean has, even though Danny has spent every minute since the war with Jimmy Foster."

Something, a vagrant breeze, Acebos' expelling of a cloud of venomously acrid cigarette smoke, toppled Mushy's project. The battered one's eyes went *awww!* under the ridges of scar tissue, and he gathered up the cards.

"Well, once there was the three of 'em, Danny, the lieutenant, and Sam," he said as he reshuffled. "Then Sam cut out. Seems he couldn't reach for the tab as fast as the other two and he never would free load even if it meant he went hungry. Accourse the lieutenant and Danny never looked at it like it was free loadin' but Sam Harmon did—If he couldn't pull his own weight at the pay-off, he didn't want no part of it."

"Something that never seems to trouble our friend Ocean," Acebos said tartly.

"No, boss, you're wrong," Mushy protested. "Maybe Danny puts Jimmy Foster on the hook for a little dough now and then when he has the shorts, but he always pays off when a horse comes in or the dice fall right. There may be long stretches when nothin' comes down for Danny but when it fin'lly does, like it always does for Danny Ocean, the sarge pays off to the last dime. So would Sam, too, but no matter how much luck he is for Danny, the long shots don't get legs for Sam and the dice don't have long right streaks for him like they do for the sarge."

Acebos regarded the charred-hemp ash of his cigarette. "Ocean hasn't seemed to have much luck with that wife of his, from what I hear," he said.

Mushy's shelving brow wrinkled. "Well, Bea, she's somethin' diff'rent," he acknowledged. "She's a wunnerful, wunnerful girl, y'understand, but she don't—well, she don't have the same *idea* of things as Danny. I mean, Bea always looked to me like a gal that wants a home and a flock of kids and Danny workin' nine to five, regular, even if he was bringin' home a peanut pay check."

"A showgirl with a domesticity complex," Spyros Acebos grunted.

"Well, yeah, I guess so." Mushy nodded. "I mean, even when she had her singin' act she wasn't like some other broads on the night-club swing. Even with all the glamor, you could tell that here was a dame that was the homey type. Clean. Somebody's sister."

He shook his Neanderthalic head. "Which ain't the right way to put it but maybe you'll get the ideer," he added.

"So this fine, clean girl marries a gambler, a wolf, a man that plays funny tricks on people that try to help him make a million dollars," Spyros said heavily. "This is smart?"

"No, it wasn't smart; it was love," Mushy O'Conners explained. "Everybody thought she'd marry Sambo—he useta play the pianna while she sang them little songs people went nuts over, even ringside table drunks. But she had it bad for Danny as soon as she saw him, it turns out, and they fin'lly get married in Vegas one night when Ocean has maybe three or four too many aboard.

"Not," he added hastily, "that Danny don't love her, too. It's just that he maybe needed a skinful to get over thinkin' he'd be playin' a dirty trick on Bea, marryin' her. He must've knew all along that he didn't have what Bea wanted in a husband."

Acebos crushed out his cigarette and tented his thick fingers under his chin. "So what we have here is a triangle, eh?" he asked Mushy. "This Harmon is carrying the torch for Ocean's wife and she's left Ocean and that madman has called Harmon here from Honolulu to play John Alden, maybe?"

"I heard about John Alden," Mushy announced proudly. "He's the guy that fronted for the other old guy that wanted to marry the broad only she crosses the old guy and invites John around to hear her stereophonic sound, wasn't it?"

"Close enough." Acebos nodded.

"Well, that ain't the case here, then," O'Conners said decisively. "No, Danny ain't askin' nobody to front for him. He'll get Bea back by himself and the way he wants it or he'll sweat it out without her. He's got pride, Danny has."

"Can he afford it?" Acebos asked sourly. As Mushy started to protest, the olive-skinned racketeer held up a hand. "Never mind. I believe you. Ocean just got Harmon here because they're old friends."

"Real old friends, from *'way* back, boss. In Brooklyn. They went into the paratroopers together. In the war, Danny saved Harmon's life for him one time."

"So now he can demand anything from Harmon and know the piano player can't refuse?" Acebos grunted. "This Harmon may find out yet

that the cost of having his life saved adds up to pretty high. Mix me a drink, Mushy."

CHAPTER THREE…

1

The walls of San Quentin Prison had hardly left the rear-vision mirror of the old, gray, four-door Chevy before its driver spoke over his shoulder to the man who sat—half lay—in the rear seat.

"We got company, Tony," he said tonelessly. "Fella got on our tail a coupla blocks back and he's still with us."

The woman beside the driver, forty, frowsy, with a breath that disproved advertising claims that vodka left no telltale trace, began to jitter. "I *told* you what'd happen," she whined. "I *told* you the cops would be on us if we called for him. I *told* you—"

"Shut up," the driver said dispassionately. He was a large red-haired man of indeterminate features and his voice was gravelly. "You ain't got anything hangin' over, have you, Tony?"

Tony Bergdorf said: "They told me I was free as a goddam bird if I kept my nose clean and didn't try to see Bernice or the kid." He twisted painfully on the back seat to peer out the rear window. "That blue Ford, huh?" he asked.

"Yeah," the red-haired driver said. "He's got a U-Drive-It license plate and he ain't even tryin' to keep me from spottin' him. If he's a cop, he's workin' a new angle."

Bergdorf watched the trailing car, one hand pressed hard against his chest. It was following them, all right. Who was it, cops or maybe a process server with some more trouble about the lousy shop? But in a U-Drive-It?

"Tell you what, Phil," Bergdorf said, after another block. "No sense you and Lucy gettin' mixed up in it, if it's the law or anything like that. You let me out the next corner and I'll see what gives."

"We'll hang around," the red-haired man offered. "He's got my license number anyhow, and—"

"Didn't ya hear what Tony said?" cried the frowsy woman. "He wants us to go along without him, don't he? Why don't ya do like the man says?"

The driver eyed his seat companion with utter despisal. "I dunno why I ain't had you put away long before this," he grated. "Go suck on your bottle awhile and leave us men to do our business, ya old bag, ya."

“No, Phil, Lucy’s right,” Tony said. “Just let me out here, this next corner. It’ll be okay. Maybe it’s the parole guy or somebody like that. I’ll take care of him.”

The driver hesitated and then pulled in to the curb. “I wouldn’t do this only if he is the parole guy he’d sure to God give you a bad report if he found you in a car with this old lush here.”

The woman so designated told the driver what he might do, if he were both amorous and dextrous. The driver might have had ears of stone for all the reaction she aroused. Tony Bergdorf opened the door and stepped out onto the sidewalk of the empty side street. He leaned down to speak through the vodka miasma to the man behind the wheel.

“Thanks for bein’ there, you and Lucy,” he said. “It was what I needed, findin’ out I had at least two friends left.”

“Nothin’,” Phil said. “Don’t forget my address. You’re always welcome if you can put up with old Ginhead here. Be seein’ ya.”

He drove off, his wife apprising him of his less lovely qualities, Tony Bergdorf looking after them. The man just out of San Quentin twisted his lean face in a bitter grimace. Merry Christmas, Anthony Bergdorf. Wife gone, kid gone, shop gone, everything gone but the gnawing worm in his chest. Tony Bergdorf, the guy everybody said was going to set the world on fire with his genius, broke, an ex-con, with somebody in a U-Drive-It Ford getting closer and closer with another load of trouble. Happy New Year, Tony Bergdorf.

Only maybe you won’t live to see it.

He turned as the blue Ford drew up at the curb, bent down to peer in at the driver, a sunburned man in a wide-brimmed hat.

“Okay, Charley,” Bergdorf said as an opener, “you been tailin’ me since I left Q. Why?”

The driver flipped his gear lever into neutral and the Ford’s engine raced. Carburetor set too high, Tony told himself; those rental guys must have a connection with the gas stations.

“I heard you were getting out,” the sunburned man said. “I was coming to pick you up but that other guy beat me to it.”

“Oh, I’ve got a whole host of friends and admirers,” Bergdorf said acidly. “You shoulda put in an application for an appointment.” He peered closer at the driver. “I know you from somewheres, don’t I?”

The other man had a nice open grin. “You ought to, Tony. You landed right on top of me in the Salerno jump. Hurt me worse than any kraut ever did. That damn radio you were packing on your back weighed a ton, remember?”

Bergdorf relaxed with a sigh that was audible to the man in the car.

This was not more trouble, then: this was a friend.

"Well, f'God's sake, if it ain't Roger Corneal," he said. His voice was threaded with relief and the first stirrings of long-unsummoned pleasure. He wrenched open the car door and slid down onto the seat beside Corneal, his hand meeting the other's grip. "F'God's sake, where did you come from? How'd you know I was in the can?"

"Well, I didn't," Corneal admitted. "I mean, I went to that TV shop and the guy there told me you were in a little jam. Then your wife told me you were getting out on this amnesty thing so I came on over to make sure you had transportation. I—What's the matter, kid?"

Tony pressed the left side of his hand in a spasmodic clutch while his face grayed.

"Hey, you're sick!" Corneal cried. "Lemme get you to a doctor."

Bergdorf shook his head silently, wrestled with the pain that had stabbed him and finally fought his way back to speech. "I'm okay," he managed. "I get these gas pains."

"Gas pains, hell," Roger protested. "No gas pain ever knocked a guy out that fast."

"I say they're gas pains," Bergdorf insisted. "The prison docs looked me over before they let me go and they'd never have sprung me if I'd been really sick, would they?" He patted a side pocket of his jacket and grinned feebly up at Corneal. "I got some pills I take. You let a little thing like a guy's gas pains get you screechin' like an old woman, Rog? Man, you've changed. I remember when you were takin' sunglasses off stiffs under fire, right after the drop at Salerno, tryin' to find a pair that didn't chafe your nose."

"That was different," Corneal said. "That was just being practical."

"The lieutenant didn't think so," Bergdorf said. "I remember him chewin' you out about not at least waitin' till the guy stopped kickin'." He cast Corneal a sidelong glance. "I heard the lieutenant and Danny Ocean are still just-like-this together. I heard they got a big deal cookin'."

The man in the wide-brimmed hat made no effort to hide his surprise. "How in hell did you hear that, Tony?"

The smaller man shrugged. "There ain't much you don't get in Q. Right now they're layin' odds Queen Elizabeth's kid is gonna be a boy and he ain't even due till February. They'll be right, too. You'll see."

Roger put the Ford in gear and checked his rear-view mirror, took the car out away from the curb. "Well, they were right about the deal bein' on the fire, Tony," he said. "That's why I'm here. They need a master electrician."

Bergdorf shook his head. "They don't want me, Rog."

“Whaddaya mean, they don’t want you? Why do you think Ocean sent me out here to collect you if he didn’t want you? You’re one of the key men, Tony. This is a big one, kid. Bigger than Anzio or Remagen. Only this time we don’t get paid off in invasion money. It’ll be the real stuff and lots of it.”

Bergdorf contemplated the dashboard instrument panel. “The last joker who fed me that line was a wholesale jeweler,” he said mildly. “He had a great idea: all I had to do was short-circuit a burglar alarm so he could rob his own place. It worked out fine. He got sixty grand. I got one to five in Quentin and I blew my wife and kid.”

He ejaculated a short, hard laugh. “Funny thing about it was I did the whole bit for Bernice. She was always gripin’ about how I didn’t make enough to let her get any new clothes, our car was a heap, I was always tired and dirty, she never went anywhere, she never had any fun.” He grunted. “Her I can learn real easy how to get along without—it’s not ever bein’ able to see the kid again that’s goin’ to be rough.”

Corneal tooted for a woman driver ahead who appeared uncertain whether she should turn right, left, go straight or, possibly, back up. The ex-pitchman swung the Ford deftly around the traffic hazard and spared a glance down at Tony. “You know how dames are,” he said. “It might take a little time but she’ll come around when the nights begin gettin’ colder and longer. The last time I saw her she didn’t look like she was having much fun clipping poodles and as far as having anything to wear, the smock she had on didn’t do much for her.”

“Bernice won’t come around,” Tony Bergdorf said in a low voice. “Not in my lifetime, she won’t.”

“Well, the kid, then,” Roger said. “I caught a quick look at him. He looks just like you, Tony.”

“I know.” Bergdorf nodded. “I only hope to hell he don’t take after me any other way. I want him to amount to somethin’.”

Corneal flicked another glance at the man beside him, then turned his attention to his driving. He had been a circus pitchman most of his life and circus pitchmen did not prosper by failing to see angles or, having spotted them, not taking advantage of them.

“Maybe you’d like to see the kid go to college, Tony,” he said conversationally. “Maybe you’d like to make sure the kid—Peter, isn’t it?—never has a bad day in his life as far as dough and opportunity are concerned.”

“Yeah,” Bergdorf said apathetically. “Yeah, I sure would but, like I said, that wholesale jeweler made everything sound awful good, too.”

“That jeweler wasn’t Danny Ocean, was he? It’s Danny Ocean who’s telling you that this thing will work, Tony. Did he ever steer you wrong?”

Bergdorf hesitated, then shook his head again. “You don’t want me, Rog,” he said again. “Besides me bein’ a con they’ll prob’ly have their eye on, I’m bad luck.”

“Luck, schmuck,” Corneal scoffed. “You weren’t bad luck at Anzio, were you? I made sure I stuck close to you because I knew there was nothing that had your name on it.”

“That was Anzio. This is the U.S., and whatever I had in the war, I ain’t got now. Nothin’ but poison, Rog. That deal with the jeweler, the way my wife turned out, a million things I ain’t got time to tell you. For a while I was only unlucky for myself, but then I got so I was unlucky for everybody I touched.”

“Suppose we let Danny decide on that,” Corneal suggested.

“Unh-unh,” Bergdorf said stubbornly. “I’ve had it. All I got left to do is go somewheres and wait.”

“Yeah,” Roger Corneal said. “Wait for those gas pains to finish the job. Some gas pains.”

Bergdorf cast the man at the wheel one fleeting, stricken glance and then turned back to stare through the windshield at the Christmas crowds he did not see. Corneal’s voice was hard, lacking all trace of sympathy.

“How long did the prison doctors give you, Tony, with those gas pains of yours?”

“Not long,” Bergdorf said bleakly. “They don’t know for sure.”

“You mean they don’t know what you’ve got or how long it’ll take to finish you?” Roger asked.

“Oh, they got it pegged about what I got, all right,” Tony said. He looked down at his hands in his lap. “I guess you know that’s why they sprung me.”

“I figured something like that,” Corneal said quietly. “You hadn’t served enough time to rate a Christmas amnesty unless there was something else. Then when you gave with the gas-pain routine, it was easy to dope it out: they sprang you because they figured this to be your last Christmas and you weren’t exactly a mad-dog killer in the first place.”

He drove almost a full block before he said, still with no softening of voice: “It’s real rugged, Tony. I’m sorry.”

Bergdorf hunched his shoulders. “So a burp gun don’t get you, so a malignancy does. That’s what they call ’em instead of cancer, a malignancy. Sounds better, I guess they figure.”

“Yeah,” Corneal agreed. “Mustn’t say the nasty word.” He spied a neon sign ahead that proclaimed the availability of strong drink and he turned the rented car into a parking lot at the corner. “How about

a hooper?" he asked Bergdorf.

The smaller man gave him a twisted grin. "Sure. It ain't gonna do you a damn bit of good to get me loaded and I suppose it's on my parole that I can't go in low-down bars but I'll drink your drinks, Rog. My answer will still be no as long as I'm able to talk and after that whatever I say won't stand up in court, so you'll be wastin' your dough, but what the hell, it's Christmas."

"Plus the fact it's expense money, not mine." Corneal laughed. He slid out from behind the wheel and took the ticket handed him by the parking-lot attendant and joined Bergdorf.

"Before you have your first drink," the taller man said, "I want to ask you something, Tony. You're going to throw acey-deucey pretty soon, looks like. Okay, so how are you fixed for insurance?"

"Nothin'," Bergdorf said bitterly. "Oh, I got my G.I. insurance, but I cut that to five grand like a damn fool soon as I got back in the States and they give me my discharge at Meade. Then when I got married and I tried to get it put back to ten they said no, I was too late. So Peter gets what's left of five lousy grand after Bernice gets through with it. Some legacy, huh?"

"It won't keep the kid in Cadillacs long," Corneal agreed.

"What do you suggest?" Bergdorf jeered. "That I rush out and sign up for a hundred-grand policy or somethin', me with this thing I'm carryin' around?"

"I don't think they'd insure you, boy," Corneal said, straight-faced. "But I know where you can pick up more than any hundred grand. Ten times that, say. One million bucks. Cash."

Bergdorf looked up at the other. There was no smile on Roger Corneal's face, no quirked mouth corner. The realization that Corneal meant what he was saying struck Tony with stunning impact. *He* meant *it: a million bucks.*

"I was thinking that the kid could do a lot with a million dollars," Corneal went on matter-of-factly. "You could leave it in trust, broken up into bits and pieces in a dozen different places. Danny can find somebody to arrange it all for you so it'll be legal, all the right taxes paid and everything. All the kid would have to do would be to pick up a bundle of checks each week or maybe clip a bushel of coupons. Nice, clean work."

When Bergdorf remained silent, Roger said: "Of course, your wife would have to be dealt in at the start, till Peter comes of age. But the way the lawyers Danny and the lieutenant would get would fix it so's she'd never get too big a bite at the main dough, if that's what's worrying you."

The two men reached the door of the Wonder Bar & Grill and Corneal stood aside, and gestured Tony Bergdorf in ahead of him. The man just out of San Quentin stepped into a scene where the Christmas spirit ran rampant, if not roughshod.

The Muzak was hammering out Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" with the volume turned up to keep it a decibel above the muttering roar of the packed bar. Everything that had an edge was heavily bordered in artificial evergreens and roped tinsel. From all angles, stared, blinked and bubbled signs proclaiming MERRY XMAS—HAPPY NEW YEAR, and whoever might hesitate over just what he'd have to celebrate this festive season was jostled by a dozen commands flung at him by the makers of gin, Scotch, applejack, bourbon, rum, beer, and *(God bless us everyone, said Tiny Tim)* Star of David sacramental wine.

Tony wedged himself through the crowd and made his way to the stick, clung to it for a moment as the pain came and went. Corneal stood behind him, and when a bartender paused inquiringly before them, it was Roger who answered for both.

"Two double rye and soda," he said, and then he asked: "That's still your drink, isn't it, Tony?"

The sick man nodded, grateful that he had not had to try to speak. When the worm turned into a clawing tiger, as now, his voice was apt to come out squeaky, shredded, and men would look at him, wondering. He clung to the sleek wood of the bar and waited for the pain to pass, and when it did he reached up and drew the back of his hand across his forehead, under the brim of the cheap hat, and forced what he hoped was a smile to his mouth before he turned to Corneal.

"You gotta good memory, Rog," he said, and was glad his voice was almost human. "Been a long time since we had a drink together. You remember the time—"

He broke it off short and shook his head. "Unh-unh," he said. "I ain't startin' that routine, not now. The good old days, the good times, they're over with. A guy like me starts thinkin' about them and it just makes it that much worse, is all."

The drinks came and Corneal slid a twenty past Bergdorf, let the change lie on the bar as he picked up his glass. He gestured toward Tony with his highball and said: "A Happy New Year, Tony—if not for you, for the kid, Peter. Here's to a lot of Happy New Years for Peter."

Tony Bergdorf raised his glass, his eyes fixed on his drink. "I oughta say no, I won't drink to that because I think I know your pitch, Rog," he said slowly. "I drink this and I'm in, huh?"

"And Peter gets one of the biggest Christmas presents a kid ever got from his old man." Corneal nodded. "Not in time for Christmas, maybe, but for the New Year."

There was the hint of desperation in Bergdorf's voice. "You're gonna be sorry you ever found me, Corneal. It ain't gonna work, not with me in on it. But I tried to tell you and you won't listen, so what've I got to lose?"

He raised his glass to his lips quickly, as though afraid he might change his mind unless he hurried, and gulped down the highball. He set the glass down hard and beckoned to the nearest bartender.

"My friend and I will have another double rye and soda," he said. "Were celebratin'."

Roger Corneal grinned and nodded. He might have even if he could have heard Tony Bergdorf's silent postscript: *Yeah, celebrating now because there won't be anything to celebrate when this is over.*

2

In Danny Ocean's hotel suite Sam Harmon sat at a spinet grand and played softly, simply, with no polytonality, no a tonality, no flatted fifths, passing notes or passing chords. He played trite, sweet ballads exactly as the composers had written them down, little tinkly tunes that would have no place in any music he played for pay.

Sam chose numbers that demanded, only the work of his fingers, asked nothing of his mind. That he kept free from his music to think about Danny Ocean and Bea and to wonder why certain things had turned out this way instead of that, and to ask himself why he had called Bea to these hotel rooms and what he expected to say or do when she arrived.

It had been easy enough to convince himself that he wanted only to talk with Bea, try to make her see that she was killing Danny by staying away from him. Oh, his motives had been noble enough when he had put in the telephone call to the insurance company where Curly said she worked: he would beg Bea to forgive Danny his sins, take him back, give him one more chance, stop breaking both their hearts. He had even thought up a couple of cleverly convincing arguments to spring on Bea, things about her marrying Danny because she loved *Danny,* not because she wanted to make him over into somebody else.

Bea, you change Danny into a nine-to-five guy, he would tell her, *and you'll be wondering who let this stupid jerk in your room. Some guys can change from fast operator into Rotary Club good fellow with no more than a drunk every once in a while to relieve the strain—with Danny it'd be fatal.*

Or even: *Kid, when I told you Danny would never change from a steeplechaser to a Tennessee Walking Horse you said you knew it and*

you'd die if he did. You said who'd want to share a buggy through life with anybody else when she could take the jumps with Danny? So you let one of the jumps throw you—was it all his fault or did you maybe handle him wrong?

If he tried, Sam Harmon could be very convincing, especially with Bea. There had been a time when she had listened to everything he told her and had done what he said she had to do, even when it made her twitch on occasion. But that was before she met Danny Ocean. After Danny looked at her and smiled at her and touched her, good old Sam Harmon might as well have been a stranger just passing through town for all he could reach her with his warnings. Or his love.

Harmon moved into "Blue Room" and for the first time his hands began injecting something into the music that insidiously underscored the sweetness with a murmured cynical jeering. The melody still predominated, but it was doomed: the left hand began edging in more demandingly with notes that grinned sourly at the naïveté of the upper register.

Good old Sam. The big brother. The big schmoe. He should have fought Danny tooth and nail, lied about him to Bea, told Danny to keep hands off, labeled Bea his girl, his property. He should have appealed to Danny Ocean's loyalty, the old buddy-buddy bit, and asked him to give this singing kid the polite treatment or even the hard, fast, how's-for-a-lay-baby routine that would have killed him dead. If he had asked that of Danny, Ocean would have done it, right at the start. For a time (a few minutes, a couple of hours) Bea had been just another broad to Danny Ocean and a word dropped by Sam Harmon, Old Pal Sam, would have been enough. But Harmon had kept his mouth shut because he had seen the Big Love on Bea's puss when she looked at Danny and this Harmon was a ridiculous clyde who thought that nobody should stand in the way of his woman's happiness even if it meant losing her.

Now the left hand was taking over more boldly. The right hand kept on bravely, but the syrup-sweet melody was fast becoming a piping travesty of a love song.

How, Harmon asked himself, could he lose Bea when he never had her? Not really. That time in Baltimore didn't count: it was a dream, maybe even a nightmare to Bea, although she'd never reproached him, never spoiled by one word the beauty and the wonder of that morning that still stirred Sam Harmon's memory.

Bea had just been starting on the way up then. The Baltimore date was nothing much, a clean enough place on Charles Street, but the money was nothing and it played kids like Bea or performers who had had it, the kind they billed: Famous Star of Stage, Screen, and Radio.

They hadn't been together so long, Sam and Bea; they were just beginning to click. Their break-in in New York hadn't set anything on fire; Bea needed experience that would trim the strict, correct edges from her voice, let it flow, and the little out-of-town clubs with their less demanding customers were the places to get that done. They had played a week at this place and Bea had done so well (and Sam Harmon's accompaniments had made her seem easier, friendlier, warmer, more desirable than she was: let's face it) that the management held her over and cut down on their advertising space. Sam remembered Bea's indignation when she saw the weekend ads.

"Look what they've done, Sam—you can't find me among all these other ads. Oyster roasts and bingo parties and just about everything else. Look what the Olney Sisters got at the Blue Mirror—and here I am, just a tiny little picture and a couple of words."

It was Sunday morning, and he had brought sweet rolls and containers of coffee with the papers to her room in the Southern. She was wearing a blue housecoat with fluffy white slippers and her hair was tied in a pony tail with a blue ribbon holding it. She looked about fifteen—or no, she looked a hell of a lot older than fifteen except for her shiny little-girl's face; her body certainly was no fifteen-year-old's under the sleek housecoat. She was totally unconscious of the effect her body had on Sam, no matter how careful she might be about bowing too low onstage, wearing the décolleté gowns, very aware of the hungry stares of the ringsiders and not liking them. But Bea had always considered him, Sam Harmon, at least five hundred years older than she or, if she ever did realize that his years were not so many more than hers, she reverted to the big-brother bit. So it was entirely innocent of her to bend and move and perch herself on the bed, poring over the papers, without bothering to cover up. She hadn't the least idea that Sam's eyes were hungrier than any of the drunks' who watched her in the clubs; he was practiced in hiding his hunger, keeping from doing or saying anything that might let her know and frighten her.

He asked himself now why he hadn't leveled with Bea from the start, let her know that he'd taken her under his wing, made a real top singer of her, because he loved her and wanted her. Why hadn't he shown his hand and said, baby, it's going to be this way or find yourself another accompanist? Anybody else would have done that, maybe not in so many words but so Bea would have known what the score was. Or the price, rather.

But Sam had let Bea keep her wide-eyed belief that he was training her, giving up his own career—if a steadily mounting price in the better bistros could be called any such thing—to make out of a pretty little child with a gift of true pitch a beautiful, exciting chanteuse

simply because he *liked* her, wished her well, wanted to see her go places. A Santa Claus, a father confessor at the keyboard.

"Only a little picture and a couple of words," Bea had mourned. She hunched over the papers, the housecoat gaping at the bosom and the nightdress veiling, not covering, the breasts well.

"But those words say *Held Over,"* Sam had told her. "Baby, you can have a string of adjectives a mile long and they won't pack the wallop that *Held Over* does. In this business, the smaller the ad, the less hard sell, the better the performer, usually. Even the public knows that when a club operator goes Carnegie Hall in his advertising he's got a good show."

She had frowned over the paper, the little girl studying the comics, the high-school kid doing her homework. But not the body. Not the young breasts showing in the gaped housecoat, not the straining curve of haunch and thigh under the blue silk, not the length of white, white leg shown by the parted robe, the hitched-up nightgown. Those were parts of a woman's beautiful body on a bed.

Sunday morning in Baltimore. Outside, a winter fog had cast a blue-gray pall over the buildings opposite; from the harbor a few blocks away had come the dim hoot of a freighter. Sam had stared at Bea and then had walked himself to the window to look down and wait out his seizure. He found himself trembling.

Make a wisecrack. Be funny or get the hell out and go back to your own room. Remember she trusts you: it would break her all up if you let her know you wanted her so bad you could yell.

"Sam?"

He could not turn from the window. "Yeah, Bea.

"What's the matter, Sam?"

"Matter? Nothing's the matter. What makes you think anything's the matter?"

"You—you just sort of groaned. Are you sick, Sam?"

He had shaken his head, eyes still pinned on the fog-shrouded street below. He had heard the faint squeak of bedsprings, the rustle of the papers she had put aside, the whisper of her slippers crossing the floor, and she was beside him. It was not perfume, not the kind they bottled and sold over counters, that had come up from her: it had been the titillating essence of young woman's natural, as yet un-showered-away fragrance.

Please, God, don't let her touch me, he had prayed. *Don't let her trust me like a big brother right now.*

But she had touched him: she had put her hand on his arm and had gently turned him away from the window, her eyes huge, her lips

parted, the nearness, the vulnerability of her overwhelming.

"What is it, Sam? Tell me."

He had shaken his head dumbly, had even tried to push past her toward the door, but she blocked his way and when he pressed against her all his noble resolves, his Boy Scout principles, went flying off in bits and pieces, exploded out of him by the feel of her.

What had it been, exactly? Rape? No, because one cry, one single *don't* would have stopped him, sent him slinking out of that hotel room, the proper bastard. Seduction, then? No, not exactly, because he had roused no fever in her until the very last, when glands and nerve ends had demanded an unconscious response. No, it had been neither rape nor seduction: it had been a girl's instinctive giving out of pity, out of compassion, out of gratitude. It had meant nothing more to Bea than the comforting of a good friend who was in torment. She had been neither shocked nor frightened by this thing that was required of her. In spite of all Sam's previous fears, Bea had found nothing so tremendous, so soul-shattering, about what to her must have been a simple act of kindness. If she had felt reluctance, repugnance, even outrage at this invasion of her she must have smothered it by the strength of her gratitude and by her natural goodness.

The world might give a nasty name to what Sam Harmon had done to Bea in that hotel room that Sunday morning but even Sam, with his strict decency, could later damn himself for no more than having accepted something that Bea should have been let keep until the time came for her to give it out of full love. For when it was done, over, there had been no tears, no words of blame. If Bea sorrowed over what had happened she had never shown Sam that she did.

And that had been the only time. Perhaps Sam Harmon had been chiefly responsible for this fact; perhaps if he had not waited for a time when there would be love instead of gratitude and pity moving her, there would have been other times for him to remember now. But he had waited for love to waken, and Bea had met Danny Ocean and then Sam had known he had waited too long.

But now? Sam finished "Blue Room," a distorted caricature of the song he had first played, and moved into "Mood Indigo." Now, with Danny having proved to Bea that he could never belong to any woman, that he'd always be Danny Ocean's man, would she see Sam Harmon as the one she should love, the one she always should have loved?

He shook his head, his mouth twisted. Bea would never change. It was crazy to hope she would. Bea would go on loving Danny, tearing herself to pieces because her pride wouldn't let her live with him and

her love wouldn't let her consider anybody else in Danny's place. No, Bea wouldn't change and Danny—Danny sure-God wouldn't, either, and so why had he, Sam Harmon, gotten Bea to come here with a phony telephone call? Was he perhaps hoping for another miracle such as had taken place that Sunday morning in the Baltimore hotel room?

His hands came down in a crashing discord. The reverberations of the chord had barely died away when the suite buzzer sounded. He got up from the piano bench, looked at the door. He squared his shoulders and put on a hiyah-kid smile.

He opened the door and looked down at Bea Ocean and a fist knotted his guts with a terrible yearning.

3

"Sam Harmon?" Bea gasped.

He stepped aside, bowing and swinging his hand in a courtly welcome.

"Well, Mrs. Ocean, and in all her loveliness." He cocked his dark head and sang softly: *"You are too beautiful for one man alone …"*

She peered past him, then looked up at him over the gaily-wrapped package she carried. "The one man hasn't looked at her lately," she said after a pause. "Sam, what is this? Where's Danny?"

She walked past him, through the foyer and into the living room, and placed the package on a table. She swiveled her head, then turned to face Harmon as he closed the door and followed her.

"He's not here," she said simply.

"I am, though," Harmon said.

"I know and—oh, it's so good to see you, Sam." She rested gloved hands on his chest as she raised herself on tiptoe to brush her lips against his cheek. "I've needed you. Maybe if you'd been here things might be different. Where's Danny?"

"Salt Lake City, I think they said," Harmon replied.

She shook her head, frowning. "No, he called the office where I work just a little while ago. He pretended he was a doctor when he spoke to the switchboard operator, said my husband was terribly sick, dying."

"That was me," Harmon explained.

Bea looked at him, the frown still in place. "That's the kind of gag Danny would pull to get me here." She walked slowly to a divan set against the wall near the windows. "You know how he is about changing voices, Sam: I was sure it was Danny with another fun-ny

fun-ny bit."

When she said the name "Danny" there was a sadness, an ache, that made Sam cringe. He kept his voice jaunty, though, when he asked: "If you knew it was a gag why'd you come?"

Another headshake. "I don't know. I told myself it was because it was Christmas and I had a present for him. That." She nodded toward the package, then looked back at Harmon, trying to smile.

"Oh, I thought it all out very thoroughly," she went on, too brightly. "Christmas and Danny calling me back. Deck the halls with boughs of holly, 'tis the season to be jolly. And why did you, of all people, go through one of Danny's routines to get me here, Sambo?"

He shrugged and made a project of looking through his pockets for cigarettes. "Call it love," he said.

Her eyes regarded him steadily. "Let's keep the dead leaves off the lawn, shall we?" she asked him gently.

He found his cigarettes, stuck one in his grinning mouth. "And let's not jump to conclusions, shall we? It just so happens I love both of you. The Old Family Friend type; don't you recognize me? I didn't think you'd come if I just called you up and said, 'Mrs. Ocean, please come on over and give me the lowdown on what happened to your marriage to Mr. Ocean.' "

Bea lowered herself to the divan. She crossed her legs carefully, pulled down her skirt a fraction of an inch to cover a gleaming knee. Harmon said inwardly: *If you learned nothing else from old Sam it was to be careful how you showed yourself, even to big brothers.*

Bea poked into the black bag that had hung from her arm and came up with a cigarette case. Harmon leaped forward with his own pack. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't think you smoked; otherwise—"

"That was when I was going to be a great singer," Bea explained. The bitterness in her voice was no more than a trace. "When I gave up my careeah I started sampling all the forbidden pleasures. I even take a drink now and then, Sam. Danny should have a full supply at that bar; it always was the best-fitted part of any place we ever lived in."

"Uh-huh," Sam said, and moved toward the portable bar in the corner. "He still drinks Grant's, I see."

"Is there any Scotch more expensive?" Bea asked. "If you're fixing one for me make it vodka on the rocks."

"A depraved drink." Sam shuddered. "How about a gimlet or—"

"Nothing fancy," Bea broke in. "Vodka on the rocks."

He looked at her and saw her chin and lower lip expressing her stolid stubbornness. "What the lady orders she gets," he said with forced cheerfulness. "Vodka on the rocks it is."

"And be generous, Sam. Danny can afford it. Or somebody can."

He fixed the drink and brought her the squat glass. She took it, sipped, repressed a cough, sipped again. He seated himself in a chair opposite her and sat forward, his big pianist's hands dangling between his knees.

"What happened, Bea?" he asked.

She sucked on her cigarette, blew out smoke without inhaling. "The marriage, you mean? It drowned in champagne."

"That doesn't tell me anything," he chided. "Sure, you were living on Cloud Nine where they don't serve beer but I seem to remember that you enjoyed it. The last time I saw you I said to myself, 'Harmon, there's a girl who's made for living on Cloud Nines.' "

"The altitude got me, though. I woke up one morning and realized there was nothing underneath me but very thin air. Nothing solid, nothing I could reach down and feel, rub between my fingers. Then some things happened, that very same morning, things no better and no worse than things that had been happening right from the start, I guess, and the cloud wasn't pink any more—just a pretty silly place to be and awfully lonely."

Sam blew cigarette smoke at the floor. "What woke you up that morning, Bea? Somebody whispering in your ear about some dame, maybe?"

She masked the fleeting look of pain with her hand holding the cigarette. "You know I swore I'd never be a jealous wife, Sam," she said. "Anything but that. But this was a little more than what you gay fellows refer to as a roll in the hay." She suddenly became interested in the ash of her cigarette. "Adele Ekstrom," she said in a low voice.

"Oh, God." Harmon groaned.

"I see the name rings a bell. So do you blame me for walking out when Miss Ekstrom telephones me to tell me that if I'm worried about my husband, don't be: he's with her and has been for the last several days?"

"The bitch," Sam gritted.

"Yes, but my question still stands. Do you blame me for leaving Cloud Nine and going down to where things were a little more solid and getting myself a job?"

"Adele Ekstrom," Sam Harmon muttered. "Not Ethel Ekstrom, not Ingebor Ekstrom—no, it had to be *Adele* Ekstrom."

"Nothing but the best for our Danny. This time I think he's bitten off more than he can chew—not to make a vulgar joke."

"Adele Ekstrom," Sam breathed. "You might know."

Bea took another swig of her drink. "It figured." She nodded. "Trust

our Danny-boy. Up there breathing the rarefied atmosphere as though he was born to it, like his model, Jimmy Foster." The corners of her mouth curved downward. "Ten million men in the war and Danny Ocean had to pick the lieutenant to make himself a double of. Which is rotten syntax or something, I know, but you get the idea."

Harmon moved back toward the portable bar. Mention of Adele Ekstrom had made him need a drink suddenly.

"Why," Bea demanded plaintively, "did Danny have to meet Jimmy Foster? Or, having met him, why did he have to say that's for me?"

Harmon dumped Scotch into a glass and reached for the pitcher of water. "It happened a lot in the Army. A rich guy made a buddy of a poor guy and the poor guy went a little haywire trying to keep up with him."

"That's not good enough for Danny, just keeping up: he's got to pass Jimmy in everything—clothes, cars, gambling." She hesitated and lowered her head. "And, of course, women," she added dully.

Jimmy Foster never taught him that, Harmon said silently. *Danny had that urge the first day he was old enough to look around and see there were two kinds of people.*

"To change the subject, Sambo, just why *are* you here, anyway?" Bea was asking. "I thought you were set in Hawaii for life."

He came back to the divan, striving for the light, bantering tone of voice that came so hard, so close to this woman. "I got scared I'd get round-shouldered from all those leis hanging around my neck," he explained. "Besides, the doctors said I had to get away from luaus for a while: all that pork and pineapple was killing me."

He could not shake her eyes. "Danny sent for you," she said quietly. "He's up to something, isn't he?"

"Hey, I didn't say that," Harmon protested. "Can't a guy spend Christmas in the States? Hawaii's one of us now: you don't need a passport."

She kept on, her voice low and intent. "You be careful, Sam," she told him. "Danny's worse than he was when you saw him last. He's so gone on high living that it might as well be heroin. He has to have more and more of it all the time."

"Oh, now, Bea—"

"I mean it, Sambo. It's awful. Danny's heading for a big crash, one that'll either cure him or kill him." She closed her eyes briefly, unaware of the drama of her gesture. "I don't like to think about it."

Sam Harmon gave up the fight with himself and sat down close to Bea, close enough to feel her hip against his, her elbow against his arm, her shoulder touching his. "Kid, you mustn't let this Ekstrom

thing kick you around too much," he said earnestly. "You've known Danny long enough to know that nothing you can say, nothing I can say, nothing anybody can say, is going to make any difference: he'll do what he's got his mind set on. We have to sit back and wait."

She nodded. "I've been waiting, but it looks like it's no good. For a while I thought about a divorce and then I found out you can't start divorcing a man until you stop loving him."

"And in spite of everything, Adele Ekstrom and all, you still love him," Harmon said owlishly. He gave a brief laugh. "Natch," he said.

He lifted his glass in a toast. "Here's to the day your waiting pays off, Bea. Here's to the day he'll hit that big crash and look around and find out what's real."

Bea lurched off the couch. "Don't talk about the crash, Sam," she begged. "It scares me, thinking what will happen to Danny. He—he pretends to be so hard, so tough, but I'm afraid that if he takes a real fall, if something happens to kick his make-believe world all to pieces, he'll never come back from it."

Sam trailed her toward the door. "So that would be such a bad thing for you, Bea? If he doesn't come back from being Danny Ocean, I mean. Suppose he had some sense, some real values, knocked into him the hard way even though he got chewed up getting them?"

"Suppose he did," the girl said grimly. "What would he be like then? Don't you see, I'm a fool, Sam. I'm afraid Danny won't get his nose rubbed in it and he'll stay on that cloud forever, and still I'm afraid that he *will* crash and wind up a beat nothing. Would I love him then? Am I in love with the crazy man who lives a crazy life that depends on the color of a card or the length of a horse's nose? If he was cut down to size—my size—would I still love him?"

Sam Harmon ran a hand through his hair, grimacing. "You're making it pretty tough on yourself," he said. "You're turning yourself up loser no matter what happens."

"Which is what I'll probably be," the woman said. She turned at the door and motioned toward the package on the table. "When you see Danny tell him he doesn't have to wait till Christmas to open the present—not that he would." She looked at the bundle and her lip quirked. "Tell him it's paid for, too. So many gifts of his haven't been."

"Well—how about the two of us having lunch somewhere?" Harmon offered.

She shook her head. "I've eaten," she said, but it was an obvious lie.

He walked with her out the door into the corridor and down the carpeted hall toward the bank of elevators. He tried to find something

to say, something that would keep her here with him a little longer, but the words evaded him. He was thinking of Adele Ekstrom, the big blond man eater, the most headlined member of that sister trio who battened off headlines, and men. No wonder Bea had cut out. She was no match for Ekstrom. Nobody, not even Danny Ocean, was a match for Ekstrom.

Deep inside himself Harmon cursed the man who had done this to Bea, this Danny Ocean who fastened people to him with his strange gift of demanding loyalty and love despite the fact that nobody who gave him this loyalty and love earned a second's consideration when Danny had to choose between them and something he wanted. It was more than plain selfishness with Ocean: it was a compulsive need to grasp and devour the excitement, the sensation, the glaring, gaudy *now,* and if another was hurt by Danny Ocean's reach and grab, if he or she was brushed aside, why, those who loved and were loyal to the sarge had had plenty of warning that this might happen: they could be heartsick, but if they were honest with themselves they could not be surprised.

"Look, baby," Sam Harmon had heard Danny tell Bea, "I'm not the man for you. You deserve the steady, sincere type. Me, I'm wrong, a no-good guy. Ask anybody. I ain't told the truth since I got kicked out of a mission party for little kids one time when I gave my right age, one year too old. I used to cheat at cards before my luck came in so strong the percentages let me play honest. I never keep promises. I drink too much and I stay up too late and I don't close the cover of the match folder before I strike a light. I couldn't be true to the finest woman who ever lived."

"Oh, Danny"—Bea had smiled—"you don't scare me a bit. I'm shameless. You couldn't beat me off with a club."

Ocean had turned to Harmon. "Tell her, Sambo," he had said, almost pleaded. "Tell her I'm a bum bet." And when Sam had opened his mouth Danny had cried: "You do and I'll bash you."

Oh, Danny had been caught in a bind, too. He had wanted Bea and there had been something about her that had kept him from making her just another scalp at his belt, another broad to be "loved" for a night or a week or a month, swept up by Ocean's charm into a vortex that spun off all scruples or principles or thoughts of tomorrow. Danny had not made the usual fast hit with Bea; he had kept hands off with a scrupulousness that was totally unlike him, a regard that might have amused Harmon under different circumstances. For Sam knew there had been other girls who had deserved this rigidly respectful treatment as much as Bea, maybe more, and had been gobbled by Danny as easily and as carelessly as though they were chippies on the

make, and with never a qualm on Ocean's part.

He was utterly conscienceless when it came to women. "They were made for it and they know it, if they're over six years old," Sam had heard him crack. "They play around with me, I put them to use."

This was the same Danny Ocean who had held Bea off at arm's length until the night (Sam was out of town playing a TV special, filling in for a top vocalist's accompanist, suddenly taken ill) when Danny Ocean had gotten himself drunk enough to marry Bea. He had loaded himself to quiet his own misgivings because he had known from the start that this one girl deserved a better break from him than the misery that would come with the name of Mrs. Danny Ocean.

Harmon thought of all these things as he followed Bea to the elevators and leaned past her to press the down button. "I'll keep in touch," he said feebly. "When Danny shows up—"

"You can tell him you saw me and I'm doing jes' fine, like Fremount, the bug in Pogo. You won't tell him I came racing around here on that phony telephone call, hoping it was Danny Ocean, the big reconciliation man. You can say—"

The elevator door sighed open and Danny Ocean stepped out of the car, Jimmy Foster behind him.

"Well, Bea," Ocean crowed, "you're back, eh? Like I was layin' ten, four and even you would be, before Christmas."

4

There was a second's white silence and then Bea made a strangled sound and dashed past her husband and Foster into the car.

Danny turned. "Hey, Bea! Wait up, doll. I got lots to tell you."

He plunged into the elevator after his wife and Foster, and Harmon heard his easy, laughing voice. "Down, like the lady says, Francis. But take it slow and go through the park."

The elevator door sighed shut. Sam Harmon and Jimmy Foster looked at the brazen panel and then at each other.

"A small wager," Foster proposed. "Even money that before they get to the lobby he'll have her half convinced she ought to take him back."

"No bet," said Sam Harmon dismally.

"I'm not going to listen," Bea was saying. She stared straight ahead at the door.

"I haven't said anything yet." Danny Ocean grinned. He turned to Francis, the elevator operator, a stringy, sandy-haired youth with

washed-out blue eyes and a single protruding tooth. For the record, there had been two of these squirrel teeth but one had been knocked out some time before: dentists and well-meaning friends were always advising Francis to have the remaining tooth extracted but Francis said no, chances were he'd have that one knocked out, too, any day, and it would save him a sawbuck or more, besides cutting up the other guy's fist.

"Francis," Danny said, "I haven't road-tested your car yet. How d'you expect to get a decent trade-in on this heap if you don't have my official okay?"

Francis beamed lopsidedly. "Dunno," he said.

A folded bill found its way from Ocean's pocket to the elevator operator's. "Suppose you let me drive it around the block. It'll only take a coupla seconds."

Francis nodded. He stopped the car at the next floor, the seventh, slid open the door, and stepped out. Danny pushed the door-close lever, jogged the car down to between the sixth and the seventh floors, and stopped it there.

"Danny Ocean," Bea said firmly, "you're wasting your time. Let me out of here. I'll scream."

"You don't want outta here," Ocean said. "If you did, you'd have made a break for it when we put Francis ashore. C'mere."

He reached for the girl but she dodged his first grab. He caught her on the second try (after all, an elevator is hardly the place for a girl to escape a determined man) and brought her close to him. She may have struggled to prevent it but if she did her heart could not have been in it because Ocean brought his mouth down on hers and clamped it there in a long, intimate kiss.

Bea's hands, behind his back, made a valiant effort to keep from completing the embrace. They stayed clenched and apart from Ocean's body for what must have been four seconds and then they betrayed their owner by holding Danny, spread-fingered, even closer to her. Her knees sagged, her face, her whole being, flamed as her mouth parted.

She fought free of his arms. "You let me out of here!" she stormed. "This is—it's kidnaping or assault or something."

Sure." Ocean nodded. "A guy kisses his wife after not even seeing her for a million years. Terrible."

"Hah! I'll bet you've missed me. Where was Adele?"

A pained look crossed his face. "Baby, baby, that's all over," he said. "It never was what you thought it was. Listen to me a minute, and—"

"I've heard it all," she broke in.

"Not this. This just happened. I just this minute got back in town. This is the real big one, Bea."

She turned her face from his beseeching stare; shrugged away when he tried to bring her back into his arms. "Seems to me I've heard that song before," she said coldly.

"This is for real, Bea," he insisted. "It's right around the corner. Just a few more days. We'll be in Plushville, kid, rolling in dough."

She sniffed. "One more time," she said.

"Honest, Bea, you've got to believe me!" he cried.

Her eyes flashed up to meet his. "Why?" she asked.

His hands found her shoulders again and he talked down at her, slowly, his voice measured and utterly sincere. "Listen a minute," he said. "Maybe I've thrown you bad balls ever since we were married; I admit it. But this—Bea, you've got to give me this one last chance."

She made her voice clattery, her mouth pinched, while within her everything shouted: *Believe him—this time he means it!* "Just how many last chances do you expect to get, Danny?"

"None, after this," he said simply, solemnly. "After this we'll be home free, both of us. And I mean home, kid, no hotel pad. A real home with the mornin' glories twined 'round the door, a croquet set on the lawn—I'll even get me a set of power tools and make things out in the garage, God help me."

She tried to tear her eyes away from his slender, serious face and could not. "Oh, Danny, if I could only believe you," she said, so low it was almost a whisper.

"So it's hard to do—so it can be done if you try hard," he told her. "And if you ever had to forget what's happened and let me make a new start, now's the time. Believe me, Bea."

She didn't quite shake her head. "Oh, Danny," she said again.

His hands tightened their grip on her shoulders. "Listen, then; just listen for a minute. We've got it made, baby. This New Year's will mean a new life for both of us. You'll get what I've always wanted to give you and wound up nearly losin' you 'cause I spent so much time scramblin' after it. Money, security."

He drew her closer. "Big money, Mrs. Ocean. So much money that I'll never have to figure an angle or cut a corner or lie or use the knife on anybody ever again. I mean it."

The elevator buzzer sounded warningly from the floor above. Francis was a literal-minded man and more than two seconds had passed.

"Let's talk it over," Danny pleaded. "What have you got to lose? A coupla minutes of your time away from that damn office—hell, you

could take a week and they'd never think of firin' you, not the best-lookin' receptionist in L.A."

"I—I ought to get back," Bea faltered. "But, Danny, what *is* this big thing? Exactly what is it that you and Sam and Jimmy Foster are mixed up in?"

"Jimmy and Sam?" Danny asked, sparring. "Whatever gave you the idea they were in this? This—" He broke off as the buzzer sounded again, more insistently.

"Look, I got to turn back Francis' veehickle," he said. "I'll tell you about it in the coffee shop, okay? Okay."

He turned away from her, took the car up to collect Francis. As the one-tushed boy entered, Ocean said: "She don't corner too hot and if I were you I'd have the front assembly checked. Now let's try her for pickup. The route. Coffee shop, Francis, and we ain't got time to pick up hitchhikers."

She could not speak while Francis was present but Bea shifted impatiently from one foot to the other while the car dropped to the ground floor. She had no chance to question Danny while they walked through the arcade to the coffee shop: her husband was kept busy replying to the greetings that came at him from every side. From the barbers in the shop they passed, and the manicure girl, and the men's store clerk near the entrance to his place, and the guard at the branch bank, and the porter emptying ash trays and the men and women and boys and girls. *Hi, Mister Ocean!* the world said with admiration. *Hi, Danny!* the world said with respectful envy.

And Bea knew Danny ate it up—but who wouldn't? Was there ever a man born who wouldn't like it? Let those who greeted him salute only his good looks, his clothes, his tips, his reputation of being a high-roller; still, to a man like Danny these hellos, this recognition, was as necessary as breathing. He had never walked a stage, but Danny had the actor's hunger, the need for applause. Oh, yes, he bought it with his free spending, his never-slackening drive to excel above all others in his orbit in everything they made important—clothes, slang, the topped yuck, the big gamble, but this was money and energy spent on the sustenance that kept his strange soul from starving.

They reached the coffee shop finally, after Danny all but brushed off half-a-dozen attempts to stop him in conversation, made by men who were all of a type, well fed, too closely shaven, a little too well dressed. The waitress who poured their water seemed delighted that Mr. Ocean was back from wherever he had been.

"We missed you," she said fondly. Her remark obviously did not include Bea.

"Yeah, well, this is a big country I got to look after," Danny explained. "Coffee, Marge, and a couple of onion rolls."

When the girl left, Bea said: "Don't you remember? I don't like onion rolls. Oh, never mind, don't call her back—I'm not hungry, anyway. But that's the way it's always been. You don't *know* me, not really, Danny."

"I'll have a chance to learn what you like and don't like and get you a bushel of everything you like when this deal goes through. I'll get you two bushels of everything you don't like, too, just so's you can throw the stuff away."

"Danny, what is this deal?" she demanded. As he leaned forward eagerly she held up a hand. "No colossals, now," she warned. "Just the straight story. For once in your life be conservative."

"Me?" he asked, and grinned.

The question brought a reluctant answering half-smile from Bea. "Well, hold the superlatives down to tremendous, then. And the truth, Danny."

"Okay. Nothin' but the facts, ma'am. Y'see, it started when I picked up these thousand acres in Texas that time, you remember, and—"

"Whoa," she broke in. "Slower, so I can get the lyrics. What thousand acres in Texas am I supposed to remember?"

"For God's sake, Bea, do you mean you don't remember the thousand acres I got that time we—" He broke off and snapped his fingers, shook his head. "That's right; you weren't along on that trip Jimmy and I took."

"I so seldom have been," Bea murmured.

"Well—yeah, I'm afraid so. But it'll be different when—" He stopped when the waitress arrived with the coffee and onion rolls.

"Anything else, Mr. Ocean?" she asked devotedly.

"Not right now. Keep in touch." Ocean smiled. He turned back to Bea. "Well, Jimmy and I were in Texas that time."

"When was that?"

He frowned, casting back. "I'm not exactly sure. Last spring, wasn't it?"

"You're telling the story, Danny," she said gently.

"Yeah. Last spring. May—I remember now. Anyway, we got in this stud game in Houston and things went very well indeed for your boy. There was this big man in the game—you know I never give names of losers but he's very big—and he had the idea that my king, queen, jack, and ten of hearts had maybe the deuce of clubs in the hole under them. He had the idea also that his aces and sixes were a solid two pair showin' and the third ace down for a full house he should beat

me over the head with because I just *couldn't* have the case ace of hearts."

"And he bet the thousand acres into your royal flush," Bea said drearily. "Oh, Danny, you can do better than that. The river boats don't ply the Mississippi any more and Old Massa don't bet the plantation away like he used to."

He drew back, injured. "You promised you'd listen," he said accusingly. "Who said anything about this guy bettin' any thousand acres? This was a stud game, no real-estate transfer."

She sipped her coffee. "Sorry," she murmured. "Continue."

His eyes were plaintive. "If you're not gonna believe anything I say —"

"Oh, for goodness' sake, go ahead," she told him.

He took time to test his coffee. In another man, the meshing of mental gears might have showed on his face; on Danny's there was only slowly fading hurt.

"So I beat him for about ten thousand clams," he told Bea finally. "To this guy it was like losin' a buck's worth of change out a hole in his pocket, maybe, but this man liked me, for some reason. Maybe the way I played my cards, maybe the jokes I told him, maybe—I dunno. People like me for the damnedest reasons, sometimes."

"I know," she said.

"Anyway, when the game broke up this clyde got me aside. He told me—well, he liked me, like I said, and how would I feel about gettin' put in the way of some real important dough? I said sure, I was always interested in dough, and he said there were these thousand acres I could pick up for ten thousand bucks. He explained he couldnt buy them himself on account some clauses in somethin' that kept him from operatin' in that part of Texas, that field, but if he was me he'd run right down and buy that land."

"And you believed him?" Bea asked. "Oh, Danny, I'd never have thought it of you. And did this stooge take back the ten thousand dollars and give you a deed to a lake bottom somewhere?"

He shook his head, his grin back in place. "That's what Jimmy hit me with," he admitted. "That's what I thought myself after I went for it. Big man and all, this Texas character had pulled the oldest gag in the world on me and there went ten grand right down the pipe."

He sipped his coffee again, cocked an eyebrow at Bea over the rim of his cup. "I guess that's why I never told you about it," he said. "I wasn't exactly goin' on a national hookup to tell everybody about the rock I pulled."

"And now, I suppose, that land—"

He clashed the cup into its saucer, leaned forward with his arms reached out to clasp her hands. “Baby, it’s a gold mine! Better’n a gold mine. Maybe that Mister Big Texan really did like me or maybe he crossed his own self up in a chilled deal but, anyway, this oil company wants to take my thousand acres off my hands.”

“Oil?” Bea asked. “You’ve got oil on your land?”

Danny shrugged. “Who knows? Who cares? What’s important is this company can afford to find out. *They* think it’s got oil. They think so so much they’re willin’ to give me a million bucks.”

Bea stared at him. “One—million-dollars,” she said.

“After taxes,” Danny added. “One million, net. It’s a firm offer, too, no ifs or maybes. All I got to do is sign the papers. And then Mr. and Mrs. Ocean will have all the time they need, all the money they need, to really live it up.”

He caught her glance and hastened on. “I don’t mean it that way, Bea. I mean *really* livin’, Mister and Missus. A home. Kids. The whole bit. And what do you say to that?”

Bea pushed back her chair, gathered up her gloves and purse. “I’d say it was pretty wonderful, Danny. If it’s true.”

He came to his feet, anger in his eyes and voice. “What’ve I got to do to make you believe me, anyway?” he demanded.

She made a careful job of pulling on her gloves. “Suppose you come to my little apartment—you know the address—on, say, New Year’s Eve, and tell me this miracle deal has gone through and you’ve given up your hotel suite and the friends who go with it. Especially Jimmy Foster. Just show me that this is the truth and not something you wished *were* the truth, and we’ll start from there. Even without the million clams, Danny: just come to me with the truth and we’ll celebrate New Year’s Eve together with beer and sandwiches—no champagne—and it will all be wonderful.”

He nodded. “Okay, it’s a deal,” he said, and then stopped with a stricken look.

“But not New Year’s Eve,” he said.

“I didn’t think so,” Bea muttered, and turned to go.

“No, wait!” Ocean cried. “I’m due to be in Texas, closing the deal, over New Year’s. But I’ll be back here right after that, Bea. I’ll be back here as soon as I can get here. I’ll charter a plane—hell, I’ll *buy* a plane—and I’ll prove I meant what I said.”

She darted a look at him, then turned away again. “I hope so,” she said, but there was not much hope in her voice. “For both our sakes I hope you can knock on my door as soon after New Year’s Eve as you can and prove you’ve been telling the truth. Not about the million

dollars, though that"—her mouth twisted—"that would be nice, too, but mostly that you're finally leveling with me."

She turned to face him, chin high. "Because if you're not, Danny Ocean, this is really it," she said calmly. "Maybe—maybe it's too late, anyway. Maybe even a million dollars and all the things you say you'll be won't be enough. But I'll try. I'll do my darnedest, under any conditions except one: if this has just been another chorus of that same old number, Danny, it's the last one."

Before he could say anything she was gone, threading her way between the coffee-shop tables toward the door.

The waitress, Marge, snickered at Danny's elbow. "Your girl friend run out on you or some'n?" she asked. "What's the matter, Mr. Ocean?"

He turned with a snarl, instantly smoothed his face, donned a crooked grin. "Nothin' a million clams won't cure, sugar," he told her, and sat down to finish his coffee and onion rolls and to think.

5

While Danny Ocean was telling Bea about the Houston poker game, the thousand acres, and the million dollars, back at the hotel suite Jimmy Foster and Sam Harmon were eying each other warily over drinks. Warily, because each man suspected the other was his enemy; each considered himself the closest friend Danny Ocean had.

Foster and Harmon never had shared any great mutual affection, dating back to the days when Jimmy had been Lieutenant Foster, in command of the old platoon. There had been no outright clash: Jimmy had always regarded Sam as a good soldier although never GI enough to be outstanding; Harmon had considered Foster an all-right officer even though he might be a little chicken at times. Neither questioned the other's bravery under stress, his own certain code of honesty, his loyalty toward the sarge, Danny Ocean. It was just that their motivation, their backgrounds, their senses of values were so widely disparate that each was bound to disapprove of the other as the wrong guy to have around Danny at a time like this. *He* was the one Ocean needed, not this other character.

Harmon was still on the drink he had mixed when he had heard about Adele Ekstrom. Foster was making his way through a tall, dark Scotch. When they had first entered the suite they had tried to make polite conversation for a while but it had languished. Now they sat silent, moodily sipping their drinks, contemplating their own thoughts.

Jimmy Foster was wondering if there was a danger of Danny

spending too much time on his doubtless renewed campaign to get his wife back, to the detriment of the main project. After all, even Spyros Acebos could stand only so much and Danny's pranks had already brought the old boy dangerously close to an explosive striking back. Ocean sometimes sneered at Spyros Acebos but Foster seldom did. There were times, indeed, when Jimmy shuddered at the thought of what Acebos might be like if this grand plan fell through because of Danny's insane clowning.

Sam Harmon was wondering where Bea was now, in Danny's arms? Had all her talk been just noise to keep her from breaking down and bawling like a kid? Was it still the same as it had always been: did Danny have only to crook his finger and little Bea would come running, ready to forgive, ready to welcome Danny Ocean back into her arms? Into her bed.

He stirred restlessly in his chair. He hoped that this one time Bea would find the strength to put Danny off, at least until this caper was settled, finished one way or another. When they lowered the boom, as they surely would, Sam didn't want Bea close enough to be hurt.

Harmon was brought back to the hotel living room by the slap of Foster's hand on his chair arm. "Nearly forgot," Jimmy said. "Frightfully important call to make. D'you mind?"

Harmon shook his head, started to get up to leave the room.

"No, no, stay where you are. Nothing secret about it, old boy. Just calling my mother. Should have ages ago."

Sam was one who hated to be in the same room with anybody making a personal telephone call, but Jimmy had told him to stay; to leave now might reflect (although Sam didn't quite know how) on the character of Jimmy Foster's fabulous mother. From what Sam had heard and read about Mrs. Natalie Vandiver Foster-Ingram-Pigniocci-Ross-Cumberton (the hyphens got pretty mixed up here, her fourth husband having been Sir John Ross-Cumberton)-Restes, Jimmy might be touchy about what a guy did or didn't do when he was about to phone his mother. It was a hard thing to figure, and Sam didn't want to louse things up for Danny by getting the lieutenant sore at him so he compromised by leaving his chair and walking to the window, to peer down an air shaft. Even through the glass and from a distance that must have been at least nine stories down, he could hear the faint strains of Bing Crosby's "White Christmas."

He glanced back over his shoulder. Bea's present to Danny was still on the table. It was a pretty thing and the bow had just the right inexpert touch to show that Bea had wrapped it herself. *And cried over it while she cussed out the knot for not staying put,* Harmon told himself.

"Hello," Jimmy was saying. "This is Mr. Foster. Is Mrs. Restes in,

please? Thanks."

Sam tried humming along with "White Christmas." No good; he could still hear every word the woman at the other end of the line shrieked into the phone, even from across the room.

"Mummy here, Jimmy! Where *have* you been? It's *wicked* of you not to have at *least* telephoned. We wondered and worried and, honestly, I was about to have you searched for."

"Who," asked Jimmy Foster, "is we this time?"

"Why, your poor lonely mother and Mr. Santos. I wrote you about him, I think?" The rattling voice from the receiver soared into a question mark.

Holy smoke, Duke Santos? Sam Harmon asked himself. *That's all Danny needs, to get mixed up with Duke Santos along with the other weirdies. The more the crumbier, it looks like it is with Foster's mother and her husbands. Duke Santos!*

"Yes, Natalie," Jimmy said. "And I wrote you about *him,* too, remember?"

It was as though Mrs. Restes were speaking over some sort of barely muted P.A. system. "Oh, hush. He's wonderful, Jimmy—you'll adore him. He's been very kind to me and he's a financial *genius.* He knows everything that's going to happen in the stock market. It's amazing."

"It must be," Foster said equably. "Speaking of finances, I wonder __"

The woman at the other end of the line broke in on him. "Of course, my dear. Come right over and bring me a big kiss. I do so want to see my big, tall, handsome baby boy."

Foster glanced across the room at Harmon's disapproving back. Sam's silent opinion of a man who would take this kind of money from his mother did not bother Jimmy; it was his mother's ridiculous cooing that he wished Harmon had not heard. And Foster knew Sam had heard it; there had been many occasions in the past that had established the carrying power of Natalie Restes' telephone voice.

"I'll be over about fivish," Jimmy said hurriedly. "Love and all that. 'By."

He hung up and went to the bar to mix himself a fresh drink. Harmon still looked out at nothing. Jimmy wondered if this moody piano player knew of Duke Santos. He decided he did: everybody must have heard of Duke Santos. Between the congressional subcommittee's scathing announcement that Duke had broken all records for taking the Fifth Amendment, eighty-four times in two hours, six minutes, and the publicity given the bombings, shotgun blasts, dynamited cars, and other loud incidents that always seemed to claim the lives or good

health of Duke's associates but never Duke, the children in kindergarten must know of Duke Santos.

A new stepfather coming up and there was nothing he could do about it, or Danny Ocean or Spyros Acebos, either, without reverting to the hitherto-unsuccessful tactics of the others who had tried to remove Duke Santos from the scene. Well, Foster told himself, the way things were going maybe that would be his next venture into strange ways and odd practices.

He took his drink back to the chair where he had been sitting. "How's the smog doing?" he asked Harmon.

"Still smogging," Sam said, turning. The pianist jiggled the ice in his glass and looked down at the amber remains of his drink. "Pretty bad here, has it been?"

"I wouldn't know," Foster said. "I'm here so seldom. It was nice in Arizona and Utah." He swallowed some of his drink. "How about a quick briefing on our fiftieth state, Sam?"

Harmon shrugged. "Great sunsets," he acknowledged.

"Well, how about the rest of the time?"

"Sometimes it rains, sometimes the sun's out. Like most places, I guess. Maybe a little more picturesque than Dubuque but there are some mighty pretty places in Dubuque, too."

"How about the women in Hawaii? Are they as glamorous as the travel posters make them out?"

Harmon's smile tried to be friendly. "Like the weather, sometimes yes, sometimes no."

It was Foster's turn to study his glass. "Speaking of women, you haven't gotten married or anything like that since I saw you last, have you?"

"Unh-unh, not for me." Harmon walked across the room toward the bar. "On the same subject," he went on, "did you get a good look at Bea?"

"Not really," Jimmy said negligently. "The play went around the other end, you know. For which I was thankful—irate wives frighten me and after Bea found out about Adele Ekstrom she's been the proper irate wife.

"Not," he added thoughtfully, "that one can blame her. Why did you ask?"

Sam hesitated and then said: "She's still in love with Danny, you know."

"What woman isn't?" Foster asked. "Does that worry you?"

Harmon uncapped the Scotch bottle and poured himself a generous dollop. This was no good, he knew, this sopping it up at this time of

day, but the atmosphere seemed to demand it. This high-priced hotel suite with its superior junk, this (he should be forgiven the word) *playboy* across the room, the whole setup, and the hint of the weird scheme that had brought him to the mainland, all combined to call for liquor, much liquor.

"No," he said in answer to Foster's question. "No, I'm not especially worried about Bea loving Danny. It's the sergeant who worries me."

Foster's shoulders shrugged under the beautiful cashmere jacket. "Danny's no baby. He knows what he wants and he's just going after it, that's all. Ambitious is the word for Danny."

Harmon came back toward Foster, carrying his drink. "What is it, ambition or a crazy yen to be big?"

"You've known him longer than I have," Jimmy Foster said noncommittally.

"Yeah, and I remember when we were kids, there was this auto junkyard full of old beat-up wrecks. Sometimes when it was raining we'd sit in some big old Locomobile or Pierce-Arrow and Danny'd yack by the hour about the cars and the stuff he was going to be someday, no matter what. He was a glockenspiel pretending to be the whole Philharmonic."

"He hasn't changed much, I suppose," Foster said idly. "Whatever there is to get, Danny Ocean wants." He eyed Harmon over his glass. "Right now it's a hell of a lot of money that seems to be available."

Harmon scowled, started to say something, and held his tongue. Foster waited for a moment and then said mildly: "You don't seem to approve. I hope you're not going to try to salt the clouds, spoil the picnic, Harmon."

"Me? Hell, I've never turned down a million dollars yet." Harmon peered sideways at Foster. "Mind if I ask a question, Lieutenant?"

"Shoot. So long as its something I can tell you. I've got Danny's orders to keep pretty mum on some things but—well, shoot, and I'll try to answer."

"Well, just what do *you* need dough for?" Sam asked boldly. "I mean, if you want money all you have to do is yell for Mother."

He waited for the lieutenant to burn but Foster did not even wince. He consulted his drink for a moment, then raised his handsome eyes to meet Harmon's. "I could say it's none of your damned business, but I won't." He half-smiled. "Why do I want money when I can get it from my mother so easily? You never met my mother, did you?"

A headshake. "No, but from what I've heard here and there she's plenty bighearted." He almost held his breath after he said that: if Foster was the least bit touchy about this whole business he sure could

take that a lot of ways.

Foster gave him a crooked smile. “Bighearted to a fault, you might say.” He nodded. “Especially with herself. She’s had five husbands, you know.”

“And left you out in the cold?” Harmon couldn’t help asking that: it was the old business about the poor little rich boy and the governesses who brought him up instead of Mamma; her he saw once a month when she dropped in his room on the way to the grand duke’s ball, the inaccessible shining princess.

“Not at all,” Foster was saying. “Would have been better for me if she had. You might have thought I was quintuplets, I had so much mother love lavished on me. She never let me out of her sight.” He grimaced. “Everything was done for me, of course,” he continued. “Why, when I first went into the Army I hardly knew how to dress myself. Fact.”

He took a deep swallow of his drink as Harmon waited.

“After the war,” he went on, “I managed to break away from Natalie, at least as far as living some place else.” He paused and then added: “But never so far away from her that I couldn’t reach her by phone when I needed money, of course.”

He turned toward Sam suddenly, his voice spiked by his need to defend himself. “Oh, I tried to make my own way. I really did try—stocks and bonds and real estate and various other high-sounding promotions of one sort or another. All I accomplished was to lose quite a lot of money, mine and—my friends’.”

“I know,” Sam Harmon murmured. “Danny said something about that.”

“So he told you?” Foster asked. “Yes, I suppose he would, you two having been partners in that bazooka-team venture dining the war. Then you know I invested Danny’s ill-gotten gains for him and it vanished. Damnedest thing you ever saw. One day there was—oh, something like eighty thousand dollars, and the next day, it seemed, there was nothing.”

“Eighty thousand?” Sam asked quietly, showing nothing of the stab of pain inside him. *Couldn’t you level even with me, Danny? Couldn’t you have said it was eighty, instead of twenty-four? Hell, you could have kept it all. I didn’t want the Goddam loot.* “As much as that.”

Foster nodded. “Yes, it was quite a bit—for Danny. And when that was gone I realized I wasn’t cut out to be a businessman. The life’s so damned *tedious.”*

“Working is apt to get like that.” Harmon nodded.

“No, I don’t think it is for most people,” Foster argued. “It isn’t for

you, I'll bet. You like what you're doing and you've made a certain name for yourself in your profession."

"Sure. Sam Harmon, the guy that can play through gin-mill chatter without making the customers scream any louder than normal. Great name I've got."

"Don't be modest," Jimmy said. "I know how highly regarded you are. Danny says you could be—"

"Danny says a lot of things," Harmon cut in. "We were talking about you."

Jimmy eyed the other man, smiled, and sipped. "I said that working was tedious for me: perhaps a better word is futile. For all my efforts, the terrible ordeal of getting out of bed at the crack of dawn, staying fairly sober, dealing with all sorts of people, mostly unpleasant, I was regarded by a tiny handful of people whose opinion I don't value as at last trying to Make Something of Myself. I couldn't kick the habit of being rich, you see. I'd always lived like a millionaire and I couldn't learn to live any other way."

"So," Sam Harmon said, "when this thing came along you said to yourself, here's my chance to be one in my own right, huh?"

"Correct. So now you know why *I* need this money. Just as badly as you do or Curly Steffens or Tony Bergdorf or even Josh Howard."

"Where is Josh?" Harmon asked. "Here in L.A.?"

"No, he's on the ground. He and Vince Massler are there, all set. We found Lou Jackson in Salt Lake and—But I'd better let Danny tell you about it. He'll be glad to see you. He's spoken of you so often, how much he depends on your good advice."

Harmon's eyebrows half-mooned. "Danny said that?"

"Words to that effect. And if he does listen to you, Harmon, for God's sake get him out of the clutches of that big-busted Swede, Adele Ekstrom."

"Sure, sure," Harmon said sadly. "Just like that. Meanwhile, I might settle everything between Moscow and Washington while I'm about it, huh?"

"She's not as formidable as all that, is she?"

"She's the formidablest thing that ever came along." Sam nodded. "She even scares her sisters, and that's saying something. She's an alligator gar, Lieutenant, and I only hope Danny finally gets loose from her without leaving important parts of him behind. How did he meet her, anyway?"

Foster shrugged. "How could he help but meet her?" he countered. "Danny's built himself quite a reputation as a man and they say Adele can smell one at three thousand miles. We were in Acapulco and I

went down to the pool for a swim and when I came back there was a note from Danny saying he'd gone off with—I quote—a big, beautiful broad; he'd be in touch. He was gone four days, and when he came back he looked almost as done in as a normal human being. Then it was I learned he'd made the acquaintance of Adele Ekstrom. Seems she rapped on his door and walked in. Simple as that."

"Goddam," Harmon swore.

"I agree, Goddam." Foster nodded. "With this thing on the fire we don't want Adele Ekstrom, of all people, wandering on and off the set at awkward moments. I will say that Danny's made a real effort to shake her, though."

"Adele Ekstrom will not be shook," Harmon grunted.

There was a moment's gloomy silence and then Jimmy Foster brightened. "Maybe Spyros Acebos will know of some way to block her out of play," he suggested. "Spyros may look like and talk like a timorous idiot most of the time but he has had long experience in the ways of the devil. Or possibly Duke Santos might know of a sure method of getting Adele to hop a plane east to do some shopping and see some shows."

"I don't think Santos would tackle Adele," Harmon said. "I don't think even the Appalachin mob would."

"Well, then—"

Foster broke off as there was the sound of the hall door closing and Danny Ocean's voice cried from the foyer: "Where are you, Sambo? Where's old Tickle the Ivories, hot ziggety?"

6

He came into the living room and made for Harmon, the boy's eager grin flashing, the slender, perfectly clothed body moving with vibrant energy, in his eyes what seemed a real joy at seeing the man with whom he had grown up, the man with whom he had fought a war, the man who loved his wife, Sam Harmon.

He seized the pianist by the forearms and shook him gently. "Man, man," he breathed, "it's good to *see* you. How are you, baby? No, I really want to know."

Harmon grinned down at the slighter man. "I'm alive, young and talented," he told Ocean. "Ask my agent if I'm not."

Danny dropped his hands, shrugged out of his coat and threw it in the general direction of the nearest chair. He tore at his tie to loosen it, let it sag below his opened collar.

"I already contacted your agent," he said. "He told me if the Bison City Four wanted a ricky-ticky piano with a nice schmaltzy voice, you

were their boy." He looked Sam Harmon up and down. "How come you're not a deep tar-pit brown, out there on Waikiki Beach every day?"

"You tourists all ask the same question," Harmon gave him back. "We have to work to eat and working means staying indoors. Besides, you see one grain of sand and you've seen 'em all. You oughta know that in my book sunshine's for the wash on the line."

"How about tryin' our other new state then? They say the nights last six months up there."

"I have trouble enough lasting one regular night as it is," Harmon said. He gave Danny a closer look. "You're starting to show the strain yourself."

"I'm feelin' it," Ocean admitted. For a second he let his face fall into repose, and the lines curving down from his nostrils were deep. "I'm beat. All I want to do is sleep a couple of thousand years, then wake me long enough to roll over."

"So you got mixed up in this caper for a rest?" Harmon smiled.

"Hell, I only threw in on this so's I'd have an excuse to get you back here," Ocean said. "You know that. I need you, boy. We got a big thing goin' for us here and we're all gonna get rich and live happily ever after."

"I know," Sam said. His tone of voice sent Ocean's eyebrows up and Jimmy Foster, across the room, frowned slightly.

"You ain't gonna be difficult, are you, Sambo?" Danny asked after a pause.

"He's assured me that he's not here to try to spoil the picnic," Foster put in. "It develops he likes the idea of a million dollars, too."

Danny hesitated, shot a glance at Foster and then another, more inquiring look at Sam Harmon. Sam, meeting his friend's stare, saw the muscles at the corners of Ocean's mouth tighten almost imperceptibly. The eyes went cold for a moment, as though to say: *Don't get in my way on this, pal or no pal.*

The next moment Danny was Danny Ocean again. "Accourse he does," he cried. "Everybody likes the idea of a million bucks. Fix me a drink, willya, Sambo, while I change my shirt?"

He headed for one of the bedrooms, yanking his shirttail out of his pants, talking over his shoulder. "We gotta get you some clothes, Sam-boy. That tropical job makes you look like you're playin' the rubber planter in *Rain.* Call it a Christmas present, me to you, with love."

Sam stopped Ocean at the threshold to the bedroom with: "Speaking of Christmas presents, Bea brought you one."

Ocean whirled. "She what?"

"She brought you a Christmas present," Sam Harmon repeated. He nodded toward the package on the table. "From Bea to you, with love."

Danny retraced his steps slowly, approached the package as warily as though he expected it to tick. "Whaddaya know?" he murmured. "A Christmas present." He picked it up and shook it, head cocked. "Funny she didn't tell me."

"Maybe she had other things on her mind," Harmon explained.

Danny's dark eyes flashed up to meet his, then dropped again to the package in his hands. "Yeah, I guess she did, at that." Another shake. "Whaddaya suppose it is?"

"Oh, in heaven's name open it," Jimmy Foster said impatiently. "Or are you afraid of the postal authorities? What's the penalty for opening before Christmas, five years? Hell, you can do that on your ear."

Ocean looked at Foster with eyes gone bleak. "No cracks," he muttered. "Bad luck."

So he's got nerves about this, huh? Harmon asked himself. *Old Nerves-Are-for-Women Ocean. It doesn't look as though he likes the idea any better than I do, not really, but this is the big one, maybe the last one before he gets tired like anybody else and some punk kid runs past him, the great Danny Ocean.*

Danny recovered himself quickly. "Just for that crack, you can't sit in on the grand openin', Lieutenant," he said. "C'mon, Sam, let's see what I got me."

He headed for the bedroom again, Harmon trailing. As he was closing the door Danny heard the phone ring and called back: "Take it, will you, Jimmy? It's probably our fat friend, Spyros, in Beverly Hills. If it is, you don't know where I am."

He closed the door, leaned back against it, and again the intense vitality went out of his face, again the lines deepened. He blew a long sigh, underlip pushed forward. "I'm bushed," he told Harmon. "Maybe you better fix me that drink before I open this thing. Maybe I'll need a drink when I see what it is."

Sam seated himself on the edge of the bed. "Your drink can wait," he said. "The present can wait, too. Danny, why don't you drag-ass out of this thing before it's too late?"

Ocean's lips thinned. He looked ten years older as his eyes narrowed, his jaw came out, his voice hardened. "You nuts? This is the big one, Sam. This is the one I been workin' my head off settin' up. And you say drag out? Now, when it's ready to come home for me?"

"Do you really think it's going to come home for you, Danny?

You're not just kidding yourself?"

The smaller man gave a slow headshake, dragged off his shirt and dropped it on the floor. "No," he said. "No, I'm not kiddin' myself. Maybe I've been doin' that all my life but this time I know. It can't miss, Sambo. It sounds crazy and that's the main reason it's a sure thing: nobody could ever imagine it happenin'. You could walk up to any of the guys it's gonna happen to and tell 'em it's gonna happen and they'd laugh you outta their joint." His mouth quirked humorlessly. "I been half tempted to go up there and see one of 'em and tell him, just to listen to him laugh. Laughin' at me, Sergeant Danny Ocean, when all the time I'd know I had him where the hair was short. It'd be almost worth while to do it, the kick I'd get."

"You'd be smart if you did." Harmon nodded. "At least you'd be giving yourself the chance of somebody taking you seriously and putting you away for safekeeping."

The silence was thick, hostile, and then Ocean said harshly: "Y'know, I might remember what you just said in case somethin' happens and I do get put away for safekeepin'."

Harmon's return gaze was placid. "You know me so much better than that I won't even get sore, Danny. Open your present."

Ocean hesitated before he dropped his eyes to the flaring, slightly lopsided crimson bow and demolished it with a wrench of his long, strong fingers. Harmon winced. Bea had spent time getting that bow as nearly right as she could; she had labored to make this package pretty, a gift good enough for the wonderful Danny Ocean, and he ripped it apart without one second's appreciation. In this small thing he was so typical: all his life with Bea he had ripped things apart in his thoughtlessness, little things which had meant life itself to Bea.

"Hey! Get this! I'll be damned!"

Sam looked, blinked at the delight on Ocean's face as the bare-torsoed man held up a cardboard box with a bright cover that proclaimed its contents to be a boy's erector set.

"Get this!" Ocean said again. "How about that? I ain't had one of these things in years."

Harmon left the bed to walk over and peer at the box, to make sure it was what it looked like. "Well," he managed finally, "that's wonderful. It's like being only half alive not to have one, isn't it, son?"

Ocean laughed. It was the most honest, carefree laugh Harmon remembered coming from Danny in a long time. "Y'don't get it, Sambo. It's a family joke. When I married Bea I gave her some crap about leavin' what I was doin' and goin' into somethin' a little steadier. You know, like women are always after a guy to stop makin' a big livin' off the horses and the dice and be sensible, starve with a

good respectable shoestore. You know how they are."

"Not personally, but go on," Harmon murmured.

"Well, she asked me what I thought I was best at, besides makin' ten the hard way and pickin' a sleeper out of a race card. I didn't expect her to really take me up on it so fast so I said the first thing that came into my mind—I said construction, that's the thing I always wanted to do. Dig that, Sam, construction! And I fed her a line about how my old man was a construction guy, built big stuff like the Empire State Building before he got sick and the business went to hell."

He laughed again, but the open joy that had been there before was gone. "My old man buildin' things; that's a laugh, huh, Sam? You and me know the only thing he ever built was a new hang-over on top of the old one, that slob. But Bea swallowed it. She took it so big I said sure, as soon as I made my hit I'd go into construction work, form my own little company. Oh, I gave her the full routine."

He didn't look at Harmon as he laughed again. "So Christmas came along and she gave me this erector set to sort of remind me what I said."

"And what line did you give her this time?" Harmon asked curiously.

"Oh, I played it for a laugh. Kidded her about givin' it to me to remind me I hadda do a little constructive work at home once in a while—I'd been away a lot." He smiled down at the package. "She took it right," he went on. "One thing about Bea, she'll usually go along with a gag."

"Yeah." Harmon nodded. "She was a good kid, Bea was."

"Whaddaya mean, was?" Danny demanded. "She still is."

"Oh, sure, but from what she said when I talked with her before you got there, she's resigned from the Danny Ocean Laugh a Minute Club, hasn't she?"

"Oh, I fixed that all up," Ocean said carelessly. He tossed the unopened erector set into a corner and went to the chiffonier, hauled open a drawer full of shirts. Sam saw at a glance that these were not bargain-counter shirts: these were custom-built shirts, made to Mr. Ocean's measurements, bearing Mr. Ocean's monogram on the breast pocket.

"You fixed that all up." Harmon nodded. "Natch."

"Yeah, as soon as I explained everything she purred like a kitten." Danny wrestled into the shirt. "She say anything to you about me before I got here?" he asked.

"Of course not. We talked about the weather and the Dodgers' chances and was Khrushchev more dangerous than Stalin? We didn't

mention your name, sil-ly."

"Okay, okay. What'd she say?"

"Oh, a bit about Adele Ekstrom and a bit about how her heart was broken in little pieces, and a bit about what a lying, no-good, two-timing, promise-breaking sonofabitch you are, Danny Ocean," Harmon said.

Ocean smiled as he yanked open another drawer to pull out a tumble of ties. All at least fifteen-dollar ties with a few that might run twice that much.

"She never said that about me, Sambo, and you know it," he said over his shoulder. "And even if she did, she sure didn't think like that when I kissed her good-by just now. I explained everything to her."

"That's twice you've said that. You explained everything to her. How?"

"I mean about havin' a million clams to start the New Year with," Danny said. He watched his reflection in the mirror as he flipped his tie into its knot.

"And she believed you?"

"Not at first," Ocean admitted. "Then I told her about the thousand acres of Texas oil land and she—"

"Thousand acres of what?"

"Why, sure," Ocean said. He smiled at Harmon in the mirror. "Didn't you know I picked up a thousand acres of Texas sand last spring and now an oil company's gonna give me a million bucks for it? Didn't you know that? Don't tell me I forgot to write you all about it!"

There was a trace of bitter admiration in the stare Harmon gave Ocean. "That's the wildest, even from you, and you sold that little girl the story, Danny?" he asked.

"Sure," Ocean said. "I had to, Sam. What did you expect me to do, tell her about the real deal? You want me to get her mixed up in this thing?"

Harmon shook his head. "Never that. I don't even want you to be mixed up in it, Danny."

The man at the chiffonier turned, and his face was serious. "But I am, Sambo," he said in a low voice. "I'm mixed up in it up to here. And even if I wanted out, a guy don't cut out of a big one like this; not after he passes a certain point along the way, he don't, and not with Spyros Acebos on top of it. Don't let that Grick-waiter bit fool you, Sam—he's a real rugged gus."

"Look, Danny," Sam said urgently, "you don't have to go through with it. Tell Acebos you've found a big hole in the idea, and—"

Ocean cut him off. “There ain’t a single hole and Spyros knows it. We made sure there ain’t a pinhole in the whole operation. If I tried to cut out now—” He hunched his shoulders in a sort of shiver, then brightened.

“But who’s talkin’ about cuttin’ out?” he cried. “Man, this is the big one. Maybe you don’t understand, Sam: this is a million clams apiece. Not a million like you’d say you got a million things to do or I’d walk a million miles for one of your smiles, Mammy—this is *ten hundred thousand bucks*. Try to think of it, Sambo. You take a G-note and you put another G-note on top of it until you got a hundred of them and then a hundred more G-notes and finally you got ten hundred of ’em.”

He stretched out a white-knuckled fist, clenched fingers up, and said slowly: “Right there in your hand. A million bucks.”

Watching Ocean, Sam Harmon saw the million dollars in thousand-dollar bills, he almost felt the crackle of banknotes in his own hand, smelled that oily perfume that came from money and nothing else. For a second he was held transfixed by this illusion communicated to him by Danny and then he broke free of his fascination, shook his head.

“Danny, Danny,” he said, “you know deep down you’re not going to get that million clams. You know something’s going to happen.”

“I don’t,” Ocean said. “Everything else I was ever dealt in on, there was the chance that something would screw it up, but not this time. I rigged this myself, Sam. Maybe Acebos gave me the idea in the first place, but when I came in I took over. You know the guys we’ve got workin’ with us; you know they’ll do what they say they’ll do. I don’t have to worry about some jerk foulin’ up, not with this crowd. It’s gonna work, Sambo. I tell ya it’s gonna work.”

Harmon opened his mouth to protest again but there was a single rap at the door and Jimmy Foster thrust his head inside the room. “You’d better head for the fire escape, old boy,” he told Ocean. “That was none other than Adele on the phone.”

Danny looked down at his wrist watch, frowning. “It wasn’t Ekstrom,” he said immediately. “That dame never got up before three P.M. in her life. Must be another Adele.”

“It was *the* Adele, my boy, and she had the right Danny,” Foster insisted. “I tried to tell her you were in Miami but she called me a naughty-named liar.”

“Where was she callin’ from?” Ocean asked. He went to the closet and pulled a blue blazer with silver buttons from its hanger. Sam Harmon looked at the emblem emblazoned on the breast pocket and wondered what club it represented: probably some tailor dreamed it up but a guy couldn’t be sure of that because Danny had a way of being welcomed into some of the most amazing places.

“She wouldn’t tell me,” Foster was saying, “but it didn’t sound very long-distancish. It could have been the lobby, God help us all.”

Ocean shrugged into the jacket, checked his wrist watch again. “I’ve got to get out to Acebos’ joint and set up a meeting for tonight,” he said.

“Then let’s go,” Foster implored. “Let’s get out of here before that woman arrives.”

Ocean snorted. “You mean to say you’re scared of that broad?”

“Yes,” said Jimmy Foster simply, “I am. Especially at a time like this. That wench could ruin everything.”

“How?” Danny scoffed.

“Merely by being Adele Ekstrom. She’s left a trail of wrecked lives and ruined plans everywhere she’s been.”

Ocean hooted. “How East Lynne can you get? C mon, I’ve got to phone Acebos and see if he’s in. No sense goin’ way out to Beverly Hills if he ain’t there.”

“You haven’t got time, I tell you,” Foster cried brokenly. “Adele—”

“I’ll take care of Adele,” Ocean broke in. “I keep tellin’ you it wasn’t Ekstrom, anyway. Not this time of day.”

Foster threw a beseeching glance at Sam Harmon. The pianist hunched his shoulders. Who did Foster think he was that he could make Danny hurry when Ocean didn’t want to hurry, or slow Danny down when Ocean wanted to step on it? The two men followed the other into the living room and Danny made for the telephone, gave a number to the hotel operator.

Jimmy groaned when he saw the handkerchief come out of Ocean’s pocket. “Oh, no,” he muttered. “Not now. Not the funny games now, with Medusa on her way.”

But Danny Ocean was embarked on another telephone joke, the belabored stunt that went so strangely with the rest of his make-up. Harmon wondered why he stuck with it: he sneered at every practical joke that was not sensationally engineered and yet he indulged in this telephone gag without the least realization that it was something usually outgrown by children at the age of eleven.

“Is Mr. Acebos there?” he asked the person who answered. “It’s quite important.”

While he waited he winked at Sam, grinned at Foster’s agonized glances toward the outer door. In the receiver he heard heavy breathing before Spyros asked: “Yes?”

Danny used a voice that managed to be hollow at the same time it was official. “Mr. Acebos? Spyros Acebos?”

“Yes, yes. This is Spyros Acebos, I told you. Who is this?”

"This," Danny announced, "is the Los Angeles County Morgue."

There was a stricken silence at the other end of the wire and then Acebos managed to speak. "You said the *morgue?* I heard you right?"

"Yes, Mr. Acebos," Danny said with that curiously melancholy briskness. "I'm calling about two young men, one well muscled and the other handsome but of rather slender build."

"Oh, God," Spyros groaned. "Foster and Ocean. I knew it!"

"Knew what, Mr. Acebos?" Ocean asked.

"Never mind, never mind. What happened? Or don't tell me, please. That Foster, I rode in his racing car once and he—Did Ocean finally get shot by some woman or her husband, maybe?"

"There was no woman involved, so far as we know, Mr. Acebos," Danny said severely. "These young men were traveling at a terrific rate of speed on the Freeway. From what we've been able to gather from the things the police managed to find, they were keeping an important engagement with you; that's why they were hurrying so."

Another brief silence and then Acebos' voice, feebly hopeful. "Then perhaps it ain't Danny," he said. "He'd never hurry except maybe to where there's a broad waiting to get—"

"Mis-ter Acebos!" Danny crashed in.

"Well, I'm sorry," Spyros said defensively, "but ever since I knew him, that Danny Ocean's been chasing tail and screwing everybody that tried to help him in a business way. Believe me, I know about the latter."

"You need worry no more about Mr. Ocean bothering you," Danny said. "Nor Mr. Foster."

There was a low groan at the other end of the line. "There goes all that money," Spyros Acebos mourned.

"Money?" Danny asked. "At a time like this you think of money, Mr. Acebos?"

"Yes," the man at the other end said honestly. "But—what do you want me to do, come down there and identify those two, maybe?"

"No, Mr. Acebos," Ocean said, "it will not be necessary. We'll bring the two corpses out to you."

"Bring them to me?" Stark horror.

"Yes, a new service of the Los Angeles County Morgue," Ocean said into the handkerchief. "We've found that it's much easier on the bereaved if they don't have to come here. We'll drive these poor beat-up corpses out to Beverly Hills in a twin-bed hearse and you can view them out there. Much more convenient, eh?"

"Look," Spyros Acebos said hoarsely, "I don't mind coming down

there. I'd rather. You drive up here with a hearse and all my neighbors are going to ask who is Spyros Acebos, he's got hearses calling on him? They'll say—Hey, mister."

"Yes?"

"Just what was in those papers you found out about me from? I mean, did they—did they *say* anything?"

"The police have put the hand on all the papers," Ocean said coldly. "They seemed all excited about something in them but I don't know what. You just stay there at home, Mr. Acebos; we'll be right out. And, oh, yes, if you faint easy please have your doctor in attendance."

"I will, I will. I got a high blood pressure and I don't want to—" Acebos broke off sharply. There was a pregnant pause and then the pudgy racketeer at the other end of the line spoke in a voice that dripped hatred.

"Danny Ocean, if that's you—and all of a sudden I know it is—I'll never forgive you for this as long as I live. Fun is fun, as the saying goes, but this is too much. You get out here fast and if you don't, if you stop to play more jokes, we'll see who laughs out of the other side of his face."

The receiver banged down at the other end. Danny replaced the instrument, smiling in quiet contentment.

"Someday," Jimmy Foster said, "you're really going to give him a heart attack."

Ocean's smile changed in no dimension except reflection. As Sam Harmon watched, Danny's grin turned bitter, cruel. "You think that's not what I'm hopin' for?" he asked quietly.

He turned his back on whatever Foster might have said and walked to the door. "C'mon," he threw over his shoulder to the other two, "we might as well get out there and get this meetin' set."

He pulled open the door, stopped in his tracks.

"Back up, buster," said Adele Ekstrom. "You're not goin' annywere till you square some t'ings with me."

CHAPTER FOUR…

1

Of the three Ekstrom sisters, Adele was the biggest in every respect. She was the tallest, she had the most magnificent body, the biggest hands and feet and appetites of that remarkable trio. Her sisters, Ingebor and Ethel, were no frail wisps in any department, but Adele made shrinking violets of them by comparison. That was why nobody saw the three Ekstroms together these days: Ingebor and Ethel had found that separated from their big sister they were quite spectacular in their own right; with Adele around, they disappeared in her shadow.

She advanced into the living room now, the fingertips of one hand placed firmly on Danny's chest. Ocean back-pedaled, trying to retain his dignity in spite of the fact that he resembled nothing so much as a small boy being backed into a corner by the lady of the house whose window he'd broken.

A beautiful lady, be it admitted. Even Adele's worst enemy (and there was great rivalry among Hollywood women to prove their right to that title) had to admit that Adele was beautiful. She had piles of spun-gold hair and a complexion bequeathed her by her Viking ancestors, clear and glowing, indicative of right living, good plain food, ten hours' sleep every night, cold baths, outdoor exercise, high-minded thoughts. The fact that Adele had not experienced any of these things since she was twelve years old did not matter: she couldn't have looked healthier if she had followed all the rules.

Her body was Valkyrian, with Rubensic overtones. Her dimensions would have been too much of a good thing for anybody but Ekstrom. On her, the outsized statistics looked good.

It followed that this great big girl would need everything on a great big scale to be comfortable, and this went for the whole list, especially money, pleasure, notoriety and men. Since she had been imported to the U.S. along with her sisters, Adele had won no Academy Awards but she had left her mark on the movie industry: there were men and women, even large corporations, who would never be the same because they had become involved in making a film with Adele.

What Jimmy Foster had said had not been too badly exaggerated; Adele's wake was strewn with wreckage. She had been named in court as responsible for breaking up eight Hollywood marriages, including

three that had been proudly offered as proof that the whole capital really was no different than any other place—why, sure, there was a wunnerful family life there, too, only it never made the headlines like the divorces and stuff, that was the trouble. Those were the cases proven by the court record; there were scores of other shattered romances, marriages, business partnerships, long-standing friendships, and other pleasant associations that were rumored to have been blown to small bits by Adele Ekstrom. She had a talent amounting to genius for bringing troubles with her wherever she went. These troubles usually burgeoned in headlines and these headlines were what many suspected kept Adele young and gay.

But not gay now as she loomed over Danny Ocean. "Jus' w'ere did you t'ink you were goin', dollink?" she demanded. "Didn't I jus' tell this Foster bom I am comin' to visit you?"

"Look, Adele—" Danny began. His voice was not actually feeble but neither was it Danny Ocean's.

"I look," she interrupted. "Yes, I look for you all over, for many days. Where are you, Danny? Answer me, where are you, when you have promised me you will coom to see me the minute you are back in town?"

"Adele—"

"And w'at about your wife?" the big blonde boomed on. "W'at is she doin' in your hotel, not an hour ago? You are two-timing me, perrops, *min sma pojke?"*

Danny twitched under the blue blazer as Sam Harmon tried to keep his grin hidden. Harmon knew no Swedish but Adele's tone implied use of the diminutive and Sam knew how Ocean reacted to motherly reference to his height and weight. Danny's eyes darted away from Adele's and lit on Harmon. Sam could almost hear the click-click in Danny's mind before his friend spoke in his normal voice, the moment's near-panic conquered.

"Bea was up here to see Sam," he told Adele. "Wasn't she, Sam?"

The great blonde turned to stare at Sam Harmon. Her fire-and-ice eyes brightened with delight as she looked at this new, handsome face. Actually, there was nothing especially personal to Ekstrom's reaction: to look at any male who was not repulsive, malformed or over sixty was to set in motion a certain catalysis in which Adele's fine, healthy glands, tissues and imagination all romped riotously for a time.

"Who," asked Adele slowly, "are you, dollink?"

"That's Sam Harmon, Bea's old accompanist," Danny explained hastily. "He just got in from Hawaii and he no sooner hit town than he had to call her up, accourse, and get her over here to talk over old

times. Right, Sam?"

His eyes begged his friend: *For God's sake say yes; get me off the hook here.*

Sam remembered Bea's eyes, the thousand acres of Texas oil land. "If you say so, Danny," he drawled. "Sure, I guess so."

Ekstrom whirled on Ocean. "Hah, more lies!" she cried. "You t'ink you can make a fool of me, do you? We will see about that, my little lover. You t'ink you can treat me like your other women? I show you."

She turned on her heel and stalked toward the door. Danny cast one cursing glance at Harmon, then went after Adele. He caught her as she was passing the bedroom door, grabbed the Viking goddess's arm and whirled her through the opening.

"Wrong door, baby," he told the blonde. "In here."

The door closed behind the couple. Jimmy Foster let out his breath in an explosive sigh.

"I don't suppose you realized it," he told Sam, "but you came awfully close to bringing the walls down about our ears with that weak answer to Danny's alibi."

"Why?" Harmon asked idly. "All she could have done was maybe thrown our boy through a window. And the man who says he hasn't got that coming to him just isn't thinking straight."

"If that were all," Jimmy murmured. "But Ekstrom could do a lot more than that. You see, Adele is dangerously close to knowing what's going on."

"What? That broad knows?"

Foster said: "Well, not exactly. Let's say that she's close enough to knowing to do some frightful damage if she really got angry with Danny."

"How—I mean, what happened that *she* found out anything?" Harmon asked. "That meat grinder, of all people."

Foster shrugged. "Danny's only human, after all," he said, "and from what I gather, Adele's the one woman in the world with whom he couldn't quite cope. Romantically speaking, of course. When he came back from that four-day joust I mentioned he was utterly done in, as I said. While he was recuperating I noticed he had something on his mind, and when I asked him about it he finally broke down and admitted he'd done some boasting to—ah—make up for other deficiencies. Totally unlike him, I know, but it happened. Of course he was plastered at the time, plus God knows what else Ekstrom plies her captives with."

Harmon stared in horror. "You mean he flapped to that woman? Out of all the people in the world, he had to spill to Adele Ekstrom?"

"Grisly, isn't it?" Jimmy nodded. "But it's true. Oh, he didn't recite chapter and verse to her—matter of fact, I never did get out of him just how far he went with his delirious boasting. But she knows enough to be terribly dangerous, Harmon."

He tilted his head toward the hall door. "If she'd walked out that door instead of through"—with a nod toward the closed bedroom door—"there, God knows what might have happened."

He grimaced at the panel behind which Danny and the big blonde had disappeared. "We can only hope that Ocean's in good form now, Harmon. He'll need to be at his best. She'll take some cooling off, I imagine."

He turned and walked toward the portable bar at the other end of the room. "Meanwhile," he suggested, "we might have a drink. I don't suppose it's exactly—ah—delicate to keep our ear pressed to the door to see how he's making out, no matter how important it is to us, eh?"

Harmon followed the lieutenant slowly, his forehead wrinkled. He took the drink Foster handed him, sipped it without tasting it. "Adele Ekstrom, of all people," he said. "Why, even if this crazy thing should work and Danny gets through it in one piece, that dame's going to be on him for the rest of his life. With what she'll know then, she'll never let go."

Foster smiled over the rim of his glass. "I think the idea is that when the sergeant gets his money he'll get so far away that even Adele Ekstrom can't find him." He took a swallow, lowered the glass, and added: "With—he hopes—Bea."

Harmon stared down into his drink. "Uh-huh," he murmured. "Full of plans, Danny. He always was. Tomorrow was going to be the day he could cut out of all his troubles and be happy. The only thing is, even if he does manage to get rid of *this* Adele, there'll be another one waiting for him. All his life it'll be that way."

"Now there I think you're wrong," Foster said firmly. "There might be other big blondes in Danny's future but hardly another Adele Ekstrom. She's the only one of her kind." He looked at Harmon and chuckled as he lowered his drink.

"Funny?" Sam asked acidly.

"Probably not very," Jimmy admitted. "I was just thinking: you're so fond of Bea—oh, and Danny, too, of course—you might consider making the great sacrifice."

"I'm not reading you very well, Lieutenant."

Foster's handsome head nodded toward the closed door. "Ekstrom liked your looks. Right now would hardly be the time, of course, but it's quite possible that you could move in on Danny, take the large

blond monkey off his back."

Harmon barked a short laugh.

"No, I mean it," Foster insisted. "She's renowned for her insatiability as far as new—ah—faces are concerned. I daresay that five minutes after she leaves Danny—well, better make it an hour to be properly conservative—she'd welcome any approach you might care to make. And, who knows? You might have talents that would put Ocean's to shame, if properly developed."

Another hard laugh from Harmon. "This is the first time I've ever been tagged what you're tagging me, Lieutenant," he said. "I can just see Ekstrom shaking Danny for me, and even if she would I don't want any, thanks."

"It would be for a very worthy cause," Jimmy Foster said wistfully. "Just think, you'd keep Adele happily shut up and at the same time you'd make it much easier for Bea and Danny to get back together again. A noble mission, Harmon. Sure you won't reconsider and volunteer?"

"How about you, instead of me?"

"She loathes me. I was plastered one night and I let slip my pet name for her, Medusa. She was quite flattered for a while. I suppose the poor girl had Medusa mixed up with Minerva or possibly Mnemosyne. It was just my bad luck to have her proudly repeat what I'd called her to somebody who knew a smattering of mythology." He sighed and finished his drink. "She was most upset."

"Wasn't Medusa the doll that changed men into pigs?" Harmon asked. "They didn't bear down on that stuff so heavy in P.S. Forty-six."

"No, that was Circe," Foster explained. "Medusa was the lady with the snaky coiffure. Her specialty was changing men to stone. Actually, I suppose, the reference isn't valid. God knows Adele doesn't change men to stone, quite the opposite, but at the time I thought—"

He broke off as the bedroom door opened and Adele Ekstrom emerged. She exuded glorious good will and abounding contentedness even though neither her dress nor her hair was as perfectly arranged now as when she had gone into that room with Danny Ocean.

Behind her Ocean passed a hand over his head, tightened the knot of his tie. If he had looked tired before, he looked exhausted now. Still, he wore a smile, the grin that came with renewed proof that Danny Ocean was good, real good, no matter what the self-doubts sniggered in the night.

"I'm sorry, dollink," Adele was saying. "I ought to know better than to doubt you. I know you loff me like no other." She bent down to

nibble at the corner of his mouth. “You forgive me, Danny?”

“Don’t I always?” Ocean asked. “You run along now, like; a nice girl, and get all dolled up fine and shinin’ for our date, huh?”

“Sure, sure, I hurry.” Adele Ekstrom nodded. She started toward the hall door and halfway there she paused long enough to cast a dazzling, white-toothed smile at Sam Harmon. “Merry Christmas, Sam,” she said. “I am so happy to meet Danny’s friends. Sometime you will tell me all about Hawaii, eh?”

“Sure.” Harmon nodded. “And Happy New Year to you.”

“Tack—thanks you.”

“Me, too,” Jimmy Foster said sweetly. “A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you, Adele darling.”

She glared at him. “Snakes in the hair,” she muttered and swept out of the room.

2

The white stucco building on the outskirts of Las Vegas bore the sign SOUTHERN NEVADA DISPOSAL SERVICE, INC., and ranged on the apron at one side of the building was a long line of neat white hopper trucks that bore the same name. As he approached the place, Vince Massler told himself that collecting garbage sure had changed a lot since his lad days when the town drunk used to pick up what swill the folks had left over after slopping the hogs—when Old Jack was sober enough to drive his cart and sway-backed horse, that is.

Now it was big business, from the looks of those expensive trucks and, as he opened the door, this high-hat office. The room might have belonged to a bank or an airport lounge or a classy undertaking establishment with its plastic-leather easy chairs and smoking stands and low coffee tables piled high with magazines. Vince wondered why the layout: did people wanting their garbage picked up make such a big thing out of it that they had to sit around awhile, smoking and reading, before they made up their mind?

Probably there’s a Plan A and a Plan B, he told himself. *There always is. And I expect the big Plan C is especially for the family with a flock of kids and the cereal problem, all them box tops.*

He walked across the aseptic office to the low counter where waited a charming young woman in a white dress that might have been run up for a nurse with designs on a rich patient, by the cut of its blouse. Either because of Nature’s bounties, or Akron’s, this girl presented the blouse to Vince’s inspection some time before he got around to viewing the face, which was also nice.

“Yes, sir? May I help you?”

For a moment Massler wished that he had some involved garbage problem that would require long and close consultation with this lovely jutting creature but he remembered he was here on Danny Ocean's orders, with a guy to find.

"I'm lookin' for Josh Howard," he said. "They told me he's workin' for you."

The girl's alabaster brow creased faintly. "Mr. Howard? I don't think I—"

"He's drivin' a truck," Vince explained. "Colored fella."

"Oh. Well, you go through that door right there and down the hall to the back. You'll find transportation personnel back there."

Transportation personnel, no less. Hot ziggety. Vince wondered what they called the top guy of this outfit, if the truck drivers were transportation personnel.

He pushed through the designated door, walked down a short hall as operating-room clean as the rest of the place, and went through a second door into a high-ceilinged garage. More white trucks, some of them under repair, dotted the big space, and down at the far end there was a tight circle of men in white coveralls. From the middle of the group came harmonica music and Vince Massler knew he had found Josh.

He moved to the edge of the little crowd, stood on tiptoe to look over a tall man's shoulder. Josh was there, swaying to the music of the mouth organ he held, his eyes closed, his body keeping the beat with a rhythmic pulse.

Vince eyed the Negro fondly. Good old Josh: there wasn't a nicer guy in the world. There wasn't anybody, black or white, that Vince would rather have beside him in a fight: that stuff they used to hand out during the war about colored troops being only good at marching and rear-rear echelon was just crap, at least in Josh's case. Josh had proved that a colored guy could fight like any other guy that time up near Bastogne.

Funny thing, too, Josh wasn't a real member of the old platoon or even the Eighty-second Airborne. All that happened before the Army was integrated. He'd been jockeying a truck and his veehickle had been blown to hell and gone and somehow he'd gotten mixed up with the platoon and had fought along with them for quite awhile before some headquarters jerk found out it wasn't mud on Josh's face but dark skin, instead. All hell had busted loose then. It had nearly cost Lieutenant Foster his bars before it was over and they'd hit Josh with a special court-martial, damn near a general, only they couldn't be as chicken shit as they wanted to because old Josh had been damn near a hero during the time he had spent with the platoon. As it was, they

dealt a chewing out to everybody concerned and let the war go on. They'd kept in touch, Josh and the platoon, and damned if they hadn't seen each other half-a-dozen times or more before the krauts finally ran out of gas.

The Negro finished the time he was playing and the other drivers broke into spontaneous applause. Massler had to grin: these guys probably had heard Josh play a hundred times and still they couldn't help giving him a hand when he finished a number, he was so good.

"And then I wrote …" Josh laughed, with a gleam of teeth, and stuck the harmonica in the breast pocket of his coveralls. He looked over the shoulder of the tall man in front of Massler and saw Vince.

"Man, I got company!" he sang out, and rushed forward, hand outstretched at the end of a long, lean arm. The circle parted to let him through. He leaped on Massler and the two clinched, pummeled each other, swore in the manner of men who loved each other and had to show they did by cursing.

"Vince, you old sonofabitch."

"Josh, you old bastard. How are you, f'God's sake?"

"Been too long, man. How you doin', mullion?"

"Okay," Vince said. "I came a long way to see you, Josh. Danny sends his best. The lieutenant, too."

Josh nodded, grinning. His arm went across Massler's broad shoulders and he led his friend away from the others. "How's the sergeant doin'?" the colored man asked.

"Better'n ever, from the looks of him. And the dough he slipped me when I said okay, I'd come in."

Josh nodded again. "Wait till we're outside before you tell me, Vince," he murmured. "This shed has got funny echoes." They moved toward one of the gaping doors.

"Yeah, well," Vince stalled. "Still playin' the harmonica like nobody else, I see. And the old soft shoe, too, I suppose."

"Bury me when I stop." Josh laughed. "I'll sure be long dead and cold by that time. I been blowin' that thing and doin' it with the feets ever since I was a kid in Detroit. No matter what kind of weather, hot or cold—man, it gets colder no place than in Detroit!—we'd hang around in front of speaks and pool parlors waitin' for a live one to put up the dough for a contest. Those contests." He chuckled. "We'd knock ourselves out, tryin' to beat the next guy with our singin', our harmonicas, our dancin'. Soft shoe, buck-and-wing, off to Buffalo, the works."

"Maybe you shoulda gone on the stage."

Josh laughed again. "You put all my shouldas together and you get

a great big not good enough, mullion."

They reached the outside and Josh led the way to a truck at the far end of the line.

"Well, what happened to baseball, then?" Massler asked. "You were gonna make the big leagues. What happened, no hit?"

Howard shook his head. "No see," he explained. "You remember that kraut eight-eight blast, man?"

"You think I could ever forget it? We both come close that day."

"I was a little too close," Josh Howard said. "Maybe you forget, but I told you my eye hurt after I got my wind back. But nothin' showed and I knew if I went on Sick Call I'd have to leave the gang so I—well, I shoulda done somethin' about it after I left the platoon but I didn't. When I got back home it was a little late."

He reached the door of the last truck and turned to grin into Massler's distress. "I did give baseball a good try, though, Vince. I even got as far as bein' offered a spot. Trouble was, it was with a southern club and they didn't have anything open in the outfield. I tried out, but—"

Massler heard a chuckle deep in Howard's throat.

"You figure it out, man," the slender Negro said. "How do you think I made out, a colored, one-eyed rookie third baseman in Mobile, Alabama?"

Vince Massler stammered, trying to find the right words. Now that Josh had told him he could see that one eye, the right, was different from the other. They made good artificial eyes these days but apparently they hadn't come up with one yet that would work as well as the original model when it came to spotting a hot grounder coming at you.

"Jesus, Josh, I'm sorry," Massler managed, when he finally found his voice. "Does Danny know? I mean—"

"Sure, he knows. Maybe that's why he dealt me in on this."

"No," Vince said carefully. "He didn't deal you in because he was sorry about the eye or nothin' like that. He dealt you in because you're a good man, no other reason."

Josh punched the other's shoulder lightly. "That's what this boy likes to hear," he chuckled. "C'mon, hop up in the cab and I'll tell you the things the sergeant said I should fill you in on when you got here."

He laughed, his tone free, light, happy. "Step inside de automobile, Mistuh Vince Massler, suh," he said in exaggerated Uncle Tom dialect, "and I tells yo how we's gonna make a million dolluhs, you and me bofe."

There was no laughter, free, light, happy, or otherwise, in Spyros Acebos' scowl as he greeted Danny Ocean, Jimmy Foster, and Sam Harmon in the living room of his Beverly Hills place.

"So you finally decide that you will take time off from your funny jokes, they make me hysterical, and drop around to see poor old Spyros Acebos, he is only head of this whole business, eh?" he demanded when the Chinese houseboy let the trio in.

Spyros sat in the metal-tubing and foam-rubber chair beside the ash tray supported by the three nude maidens, glowering through a cloud of bitter blue-black cigarette smoke. Mushy was at the bar with his card castle and although the battered former pug gave Danny a glance of affection he did not leave his place: fourteen stories, this one was, and if the boss kept yelling in the other direction he might break his all-time record.

"And you, Foster," Spyros went on. His tone changed from one of flat hostility to plaintive reproach. "You, I trusted. You, I thought maybe could keep this wild man from kicking over the traces. So what do I find out? That you're not much better than Mr. Danny Ocean at —"

"Don't bug us," Ocean cut in. "Weve been workin' ourselves to the bone." He scaled his hat across to a chair and headed for the bar, speaking over his shoulder to the thickset man in the chair. "What's your complaint, Spyros? Are you teed off because we spent our time linin' up the necessary instead of yakkin' over the phone to you? I said Jimmy and I would get things set—we didn't contract to be a coupla phone pals, did we?"

"Get things set," Acebos repeated. "Hah!"

There was tense quiet in the big room until Ocean came back from the bar with the drink he had mixed himself, taking extreme care not to disturb Mushy's house of cards.

"What's the trouble, Spyros?" he asked. "Are you still sore about that call from the morgue?"

Acebos jerked as though he had been stuck with something sharp. A cloud of cigarette smoke erupted from between his thick lips. "Oh, no," he said heavily. "Why should I be sore? I am merely told that you and Foster are dead, that's all; laying on a marble slab."

He raised his dark, pouched eyes to Danny's.

"I cried," he admitted. "I wept. But not for you, Danny Ocean. As far as I'm concerned right now you could drop dead. No, I wept for the operation, the work I put in, my investment."

Ocean dropped into a chair opposite Acebos. The others, Foster and

Harmon, drifted toward the bar.

"Well, now that were here—" Danny began.

"I still weep," Spyros cut in. "All this time wasted and no time left, and what have you done? What's anybody done? I sit here on top of the biggest operation anybody ever heard of and I get nothing except once in a while Roger Corneal calls me collect from San Francisco to tell me everything's fine. So I grant you we got that Bergdorf—I even grant you that you arranged it with the governor to spring him in time. But what else have we got? Nothing, as far as I can find out."

He heaved a wrenched sigh. "So I'm sore," he said. "So I'm entitled."

Danny Ocean regarded the older man with deep concern. "You worry too much, Spyros," he said solicitously. "It ain't good for a man in your condition."

"My condition would be fine if you'd pay attention to business," the dark-faced man opposite muttered. "You think it's good for my blood pressure to get telephone calls like the one from the morgue? You think it makes me sleep good nights knowing you've been wasting all this time touring around high-priced places, dodging the couple of telephone calls I make to try to find out what's going on?"

"Boss," Mushy risked from the bar, "I kept tellin' you you needn't have worried. I kept tellin' you the sarge would take care of everything."

"I know." Acebos sighed. "But this you've been doing ever since you came with me, trying to keep me from getting excited so I won't knock down your idiotic cards." His eyes came back to Danny's. "So now perhaps you'll tell me. How much have we got left to do?"

"Nothin'," Ocean said calmly. "Everything's done that oughta be done at this stage of the game."

"You mean it?" Acebos asked, without much hope. "This isn't another one of your funny jokes?"

"You shoulda listened to Mushy," Ocean said. He took a swallow of his drink. "It's all set. Everybody who's s'posed to be here will meet here tonight at nine o'clock. Even Josh and Vince Massler; they're comin' down from Vegas."

"You mean the soup man, too? You got hold of him?"

Danny nodded. "Pete Rheimer. He'll be here in the cool of the evenin'."

"And—and all the others, Danny?" Spyros said. "You actually mean it? You're not fooling a poor old man, he's so stupid you smart fellas can't help but make a patsy of me?"

Ocean's smile hardened at the edges. "Let's cut the crap, Spyros," he

said. “I know exactly how stupid you are. But like I said, they’ll be here. All four of ’em, Pete, Roger, Tony Bergdorf, Lou Jackson, along with Vince and Josh. I suppose I can depend on you to have Mushy and Curly here—and you, yourself.” His voice played it straight. “I can depend on you for that, can’t I, Spyros?”

Acebos caught himself nodding sober assurance and Mushy, watching from the bar, saw his neck begin to swell. The big bruised one spoke hastily.

“Danny, you know what I been thinkin’, hey?” he asked.

Ocean twisted in his chair to look back at the bar. “What?”

“I been thinkin’ we add up to eleven guys. I think I got it straight. Let’s see”—he began ticking off the count on his big broken-knuckled fingers—“they’s Danny and me and the lootenant and Sam Harmon and Curly and Josh Howard and old Vincerino and Tony and Roger Corneal and Lou Jackson and Pete Rheimer.” He looked up triumphantly. “Eleven, like I said!”

“So?” grunted Spyros Acebos. “You expect us to march around the room cheering and singing, maybe, because you can count?”

“No,” Mushy O’Conners said. “Eleven guys, don’t you get it? Like a football team. A team, we are.” He gazed across the room from under his scarred brows. “A winnin’ team, a champeenship team. Danny Ocean’s eleven.”

There was a silence that stretched and then Spyros Acebos grunted. “So boola-boola,” he said. “Congratulations, Mr. Ocean, on getting elected captain of this team. I see I ain’t on it but I don’t suppose I should have expected to be. No, I am just the one that owned the football in the first place and went in hock for the uniforms and invented the game, that’s all.”

His black eyes gleamed. “But just the same it is nice the boys have elected you captain, Danny. Only be sure you don’t blow the game because in this league you only got one chance and it’s tough on the loser. Real tough, Danny.”

4

It was late that afternoon when the maid opened the door of the large and elegant residence of Mrs. Natalie Vandiver Foster-Ingram-Pigniocci-Etcetera-Etcetera Restes in answer to Jimmy Foster’s ring.

Foster laughed silently at sight of the past-middle-age servant. Where did Mother get them? As her own age climbed, Natalie’s maids got older and homelier: it must be a task these days to find grandmother-type maids whose old bones would still let them get around enough to care for Natalie’s carefully cultivated helplessness.

The system doubtless demanded three of these old biddies where one younger woman could have served, but that had been the rule in Natalie's ménages ever since she had lost a husband (which one had it been, Ross-Cumberton or the garlicky Italian?) to a cute thing in frilly cap and apron.

"Good evening, Mr. Foster; Mrs. Restes is expecting you," this old girl said.

"Good evening," Jimmy said. He looked past the maid at the cocktail party that was spilling out into the hallway from the rooms on both sides and winced. "She's entertaining?"

"Yes, sir. But she's upstairs just now, I think, Mr. Foster, if you'd like to see her alone."

Foster nodded and slipped inside, and headed toward the stairs leading to the second floor. He had not quite reached them when there was a hand at his shoulder, a heavy voice in his ear.

"Your mamma's coming right down, Jimmy. You might as well wait for her down here."

Foster turned. He looked into dark eyes almost as melancholy as Spyros Acebos' but set in features that were not Spyros' at all. This man had a lean, hard face, a rattrap mouth, a ruthlessness that contrasted strangely with the sad eyes.

Jimmy knew who this must be before the other man spoke.

"I'm Duke Santos," he said, and his hand came out. "I recognized you from the pictures your mamma showed me."

Foster accepted the handshake after a tiny hesitation. He had no love for people who called him Jimmy on sight, he had less love for high-level hoodlums such as Duke Santos, but there seemed little point in not accepting the other's hand. Any unpleasantness here in the hallway might spoil Natalie's party, and there was a certain check, the purpose of this visit, that could be held up if Mother was annoyed.

He turned back from the stairs and casually studied this man who probably was going to be his next stepfather. Duke Santos undoubtedly had earned his nickname by his quote classy unquote clothes, but now that he had acquired stature in the syndicates he eschewed all suggestion of flashiness. His suit was of oxford gray and of a cut that would have done credit to a senior partner of the House of Morgan, his tie was somber, even the cuff links that showed just under the edge of his sleeves were plain round, dull-gold studs.

He was handsome in a hard-bitten way. His hair was gray-flecked, curly and real; his complexion showed the effects of hours under the sun or ultraviolet lamp. He was smiling at Foster, rather anxiously, it seemed to Jimmy, and his teeth were remarkably good if they were

his own, expertly made if they were not.

"I'm glad to meet you after all this time," he was assuring Foster. "We never seemed to make connections before, ever since I met your mamma."

Jimmy wondered fleetingly how Natalie liked this "mamma" business, if she'd heard it. He busied himself taking a cigarette from a casque on a table beside him and asked: "You met her in Naples, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Naples, *Italy."* When Jimmy's brows rose, he explained: "There's one in Florida, too. A Naples, I mean. Yeah, I met your mamma in Naples, Italy. She showed me Europe like I never saw it before. Your mamma's got very good taste, Jimmy."

"Usually," Foster said briefly. He offered the silver cigarette box to Santos and Duke held up a hand.

"I give them up," he explained. "I used to smoke three-four packs a day and then I quit 'em"—snap of fingers—"just like that. Overnight, y'might say."

"Marvelous," Jimmy murmured. He glanced up the stairs and then toward the library door where the tide line of the cocktail party lapped. Santos followed his gaze and explained again.

"Just a few friends we asked in for cocktails. Your mamma will take you around and introduce you when she comes down."

Jimmy noted the "we asked in" way of putting it; did that mean Natalie had already married this character? Duke provided the answer by reaching into a pocket and taking out a velvet-covered ring box. He snapped up the lid and handed it to Foster, and Jimmy looked down at the largest diamond he had ever seen unattended by a uniformed guard. He blinked, glanced up at Santos' inquiring eyes.

"Whaddaya think? She gonna like it?"

"You mean my mother?" Foster managed.

"Who else but your mamma? I want to marry her. Okay with you, Jimmy?"

Foster shrugged and handed back the unbelievable diamond. "Congratulations," he said. "It's a nice ring."

Duke Santos might wear Union League Club clothes but he couldn't resist saying: "I got it wholesale, y'might say. I mean the guy that sold it to me owed me some favors. Big favors, kid. In other words, he'd better give it to me at a right price and make sure it's a good one, huh?"

He replaced the ring box in his pocket, his eyes on Foster. "Your mamma was sayin' that you're a very busy man," he said after a brief pause. "What you doin', if I'm not bein' too nosy?"

Another shrug from Foster. “A little of about everything that comes along.”

Santos nodded in appreciation of the other’s reticence. “I get you,” he said. “That’s me, too—a little of everything that comes along.” He sniffed hungrily at Jimmy’s cigarette smoke, caught himself, hurried on in conversation. “When I was a kid I had a lotta nothin’. Now I got a lotta everything, y’might say.” He twisted his lean face in a grimace. “I gotta lotta years, too. And a sick stomach.”

“The price of success,” Foster sympathized coldly.

“A fact. Y’might not believe it, lookin’ at me now, but when I was a kid I was so poor I walked New York City barefoot most of the time, even in winter. I thought that was the way it hadda be, I guess, till one day I’m swimmin’ in the East River. Y’might say that what happened that day changed my whole life.”

“Oh?” *Where the hell is Natalie?*

“A fact. I was in swimmin’ and when I come out on the wharf I see a lotta shoes the kids had took off and there’s one brand-new pair there. I put ’em on. They fit. Just then a kid yells hey, them’s my shoes. So we fight. I win and I got myself a pair of brand-new shoes. It’s the other kid that’s barefoot now, see?”

Foster nodded. For some reason he wondered how badly the other kid had been beaten for coming home without his brand-new shoes.

“So it’s been like that ever since, with me,” Duke Santos said proudly. “Fight, fight, always fight.”

“And you always walk off with the brand-new shoes?” Jimmy Foster murmured.

“Sure. And why? Because I got the guts, is why. Like you, when you’re a lootenant in the paratroopers like your mamma told me.”

“Well, I wasn’t—”

“I often asked myself,” Santos broke in, “would I have the guts to jump outta an airplane like you did, with people waitin’ on the ground for me to come floatin’ down, a big target like that? I dunno. You gotta be young to do things like that.” He grimaced again. “You gotta be young to do anything.” His eyes fixed themselves on a point beyond Foster and grew more melancholy than ever. “Even take a drink,” he said glumly.

Jimmy turned. A waiter stood there with a tray of assorted drinks: champagne cocktails, martinis, manhattans.

“You, though,” Santos urged, “you gotta have a drink to the wedding, Jimmy.”

Foster nodded. “I can stand one,” he admitted, and picked up a martini, “but I can’t drink alone.”

Santos looked tortured. “Like I said, I got a sick stomach,” he apologized. “The doc says no booze, no cigarettes, no nothin’.” He touched his stomach. “Delicate.”

Jimmy took another martini off the tray and handed it to the older man. “Fight it, Mr. Santos,” he said sternly. “Fight it as you would anything else. You got the guts. You always win. Why not win over your delicate stomach?”

Duke Santos looked yearningly at the martini he had taken from Jimmy.

“It’s mostly a state of mind,” Foster said. “You can win over this as you’ve won over everything else, if you put your mind to it.”

“I don’t believe you,” Duke Santos said, “but what the hell!”

He tossed off the martini as though it were a straight shot. The gin and vermouth hit the delicate stomach and Mr. Duke Santos began to turn gray, then greenish-gray.

“I shouldn’t never to’ve listened to you, Jimmy,” he said reproachfully. He put the glass down on the table beside the cigarette casque and inhaled several deep, gasping breaths, turning greener. “That’s a hell of a way, I must say, for you to treat the guy that’s gonna be your popa.”

With which, hand clasped to rattrap mouth, he turned and fled.

Foster felt good as he turned toward the stairway again. Call him “Jimmy” on sight, would he? Brag about his guts and the secret of his success, stealing shoes at an early age, would he? There had been some dillies in Natalie’s list of husbands but Duke Santos looked as though he was going to be the dilliest of the lot.

“Darling!” Natalie Restes caroled from the landing above him. “At last!”

She descended with a rush, arms outstretched. Jimmy caught her as she gave a girlishly impetuous jump from the third step and as he lowered her to her feet he looked down at his mother with genuine affection. Natalie might be empty-headed, she might be vain, she might be careless about a lot of things that some people felt were very important, but she was not mean, there wasn’t an ugly streak in her make-up, she was bighearted, trusting, friendly to everyone—what better qualities, or rarer ones, could be found in a woman these days?

He kissed her briefly on the cheek and straightened. His mother was looking off in the direction Duke Santos had taken, a tiny frown etched over the plucked brows beneath her mop of dead-white hair.

“Now what’s Duke doing, running away like that?” she asked fretfully.

“A slight attack of courage,” Foster explained. “Afraid I egged him

into taking a drink."

"Oh, dear," Natalie Restes mourned. "He knows he can't touch it, poor darling."

"So he said," Jimmy admitted. "Naughty of me, wasn't it?"

Natalie gazed up at her son, trying to keep the love and admiration from ruining her attempt at maternal displeasure, and failing. "Well, it *was* naughty," she said. "And not congratulating me is naughtier still. Do I have to ask you to?"

He smiled and bent again to brush her cheek with his lips. "Sorry, Natalie. Bon voyage again, and many of 'em. How's that?"

She put on a little-girl's pout and Jimmy wondered again at the fact that such expressions were not ridiculous in a woman of—how many years?

"I suppose I'll have to be satisfied with it," his mother said ruefully. "After all, I couldn't expect you to be deliriously happy, could I? The others, except your father, were such awful mistakes."

She turned to her son and reached up to take his lapel. The grasp was light but Foster could sense its urgency. "Oh, Jimmy," she said, "I know how it must seem to you—as though I were on a merry-go-round, trying to catch the brass ring. But this is *it,* Jimmy. I *know* it is. I *feel* it."

"I hope so, Natalie," he said softly, sincerely. "Truly I do. You know I want you to be happy, don't you? If Duke Santos can bring you happiness, I'm all for him, delicate stomach, reputation, and all. Have you set the date, by the way?"

She shook her white mop. "He hasn't been that definite yet."

"Don't worry, he will be," Foster said. "Tell you a secret—he showed me the ring. It's the biggest one you ever got, I think. Must have cost a small fortune." He hesitated and then added: "Speaking of fortunes, or the lack of them …"

"I know, I know." Natalie dipped into the neck of her dress and came up with a folded green slip. Foster took it and hastily (guiltily?) shoved it in his pocket.

"Thanks, Mother," he said. "I—" He stopped: he had been about to say something he knew he should have said a long time ago, that this was the last money he would have to take from her. He caught himself in time: there would be a thousand questions.

"You're welcome, dear," Natalie said mechanically. "I do hope your business gets on its feet soon. Oh, not for the money's sake, certainly, but I know you'd be so pleased. I was telling Duke the other day that you worked so hard and had such *abysmally* bad luck. He said that possibly he could give you some pointers, sort of take you in hand,

and I said—Why, what's the matter, dear?"

Duke Santos taking me in hand: that's all I need.

"Nothing," he told Natalie in a low voice.

"But you look so strange. Tell me, Jimmy."

"All right, it's Santos," he burst out. "Are you sure you want to marry him, Natalie? Do you know anything at all about his reputation, the things he's been accused of—?"

"He may have been accused, but they were wrong!" Natalie Restes broke in. "Has anybody ever *proved* anything against Duke, Jimmy? Ever? No, even that bright young man in Washington with the awful haircut; Duke made a perfect *fool* of him."

"He took the Fifth Amendment a couple of hundred times, if that's making a fool of the opposition," Foster said dryly. "And they did nail him once, you know. He was sent to prison—"

"When he was a mere boy," Natalie broke in again. "Certainly, he made a mistake when he was hardly more than a baby. He paid for it, but ever since they—they've been *hounding* him." Her gray eyes flashed indignantly, her exquisitely corseted body quivered with her umbrage.

Jimmy Foster sighed. He should have known better. He had tried to steer Mother off at least two of her other husbands, the Italian and Ross-Cumberton, and each time he had accomplished nothing except tears and pique that on each occasion had resulted in Natalie shutting off the golden flow in a pettish striking back. It had been a painful time—and not only because of the money—and the end results had always been as though he had kept his mouth shut.

With Duke Santos, he told himself, the situation was different. Santos was no slack-chinned Britisher with an affinity for chubby bottoms of either sex nor a garlicky Italian with a dubious title. Duke Santos was a dangerous, ruthless man. God only knew why he wanted to marry Natalie: perhaps he thought it would bring him social acceptance as her husband, perhaps it was even love, but it almost surely couldn't be Mother's money, as considerable as that was. Santos had been accused of many things recently but none of them had been bankruptcy. He was known as that rarity among the hoodlum fraternity, the man who kept a tight fist closed over his ill-gotten dough.

Natalie and Duke Santos: the wolf and the—little white hen. Any son worthy of the name would tell his mother no, by God, you can't do it, for her own sake. Any other man would Take Steps; he would forget all past failures in that direction, the possibility that Santos would actively resent his opposition, no matter how futile. Another man would—

Yes, but this was Jimmy Foster and the check signed by Natalie Restes crackled in his pocket. Jimmy forced a smile to his face, leaned forward to kiss his mother again. “All right, all right,” he said soothingly. “Simmer down. I just wanted to make sure he was worthy of you, that’s all. No man could be, of course, but if Duke Santos is what you want, take him with my blessing.”

She changed instantly. Her clouded face, the near tears, vanished as she laughed happily. “Oh, Jimmy, you’ll love him when you get to know him,” she exclaimed. “He—he’s so *different.”*

“I’m sure,” Foster murmured.

“And now you’ve got to come and meet people,” Natalie said, tucking his hand in her elbow. “I’m dying to show you off.”

“I’m sorry, Mother, but I can’t stay. Just one drink and then I really must be going. Big business conference.”

The clouds again, but faint and fleeting. “Oh, dear, always business,” she complained. “Why must you—Oh, goodness.”

Her eyes were pinned on something or somebody beyond Foster. Her open, pretty face showed distaste. Jimmy turned and swallowed hard.

“W’ere is he?” boomed Adele Ekstrom, descending upon him. “Is he here with you, the little rat?”

5

Natalie Restes gave a subdued squeak but held her ground. Foster repressed the immediate urge to turn and run, forced a smile, and even took a forward step to meet the oncoming blonde. Adele wore acres of sables over her black, richly highlighted dress, an inverted wastebasket hat that would have reminded Jimmy Foster of the late 1920’s if he could remember that far back. Her high cloche, her stilt heels, her general magnificence, made Adele seem ten feet tall.

“W’ere is he, that Danny Ocean?” she cried. “Don’ try to hide him from me.”

“He’s not here,” Jimmy said in what he hoped was a steady voice. He half turned toward his mother. “Have you met your hostess, Mrs. Restes, Miss Ekstrom?”

Adele nodded briefly at Natalie. “How d’you do? Charming party.”

“I’m so glad you’re enjoying yourself, Miss—I’m sorry but you must have been on my fiancé’s invitation list and I’m afraid I didn’t catch your name.”

As Adele Ekstrom was more commonly recognized in Los Angeles than the Hollywood Bowl, this constituted a solid left hook, and Jimmy’s admiration for his mother took a big leap. Ekstrom’s gray-

blue eyes widened under the impact of the wallop and then narrowed again.

"I am Adele Ekstrom," she said. "And I have been so anxious to meet you, Mrs. Restes, but no, it seems always that my friends and the *older crowd* never seem to get together like they should."

Ouch. Jimmy winced inwardly at that *older crowd* counter-punch. It did not seem to faze Natalie; her smile grew more confident.

"Isn't it so true?" she asked sweetly. "Just the other day I was telling somebody I thought it was high time we shut our eyes to things like marijuana parties and drunken-driving arrests and included some of the other crowd on our invitation lists, just to sort of show them that behaving decently can be fun."

Jimmy Foster had been trained in the Eighty-second Airborne to move fast to avoid enfilade fire. He moved fast now. He took Adele's elbow, turned her about, and spoke over his shoulder as he bore the furious Swede away.

"I'll see you later, Mother," he caroled. "I want to show Miss Ekstrom the—the pool."

"Let go of your hands off me," Adele fumed, but Foster steered her down the hall onto the patio which spread across the back of the big house. Out here the crowd was slimmer, an earlier threat of rain having precluded a fourth bar beside the pool, and when Jimmy had propelled his escort through the doors, out onto the flagging, he dropped her elbow. Let her demolish him now; the blood wouldn't splatter Natalie or as many of the guests.

Adele glared down at him, breathing deeply, the highlights of her black satin bosom like the flickers of a thunderstorm over the Rockies.

"You worm," she said. "Someday I will—"

"Oh, doubtless," Jimmy interrupted. "But I thought you wanted to know about Danny."

"W'ere is he? He was suppose to call for me in one hour after I left him at the hotel. One hour, he promised. Oh, that little bostard. Someday I will kill him." She looked around as though hoping Danny Ocean were at hand to be slain on the spot.

"He got tied up," Jimmy explained. "I know he tried to reach you but—"

"That is a lie! All day I have sat beside the telephone like a foolish shopgirl. I belief him after all this time. I am a fool."

"No, really," Foster protested. "Something wrong with the phone—out of order or something, I'm sure. But he simply had to attend this conference and he was tied up."

"Tied up, hah! I tie him up when I lay hands on him. Like a—what

do you say?—like a troosed fowl. Yes, like a troosed fowl. All day I sat beside the telephone, weeping, while he was two-timing me with his simple little wife, I bet you, laughing at Ekstrom."

"Oh, but he wasn't." Foster's voice was shocked. "He was at this business conference. And, besides, you're here at this party now, aren't you? I mean to say, you couldn't have sat beside that telephone all day if you're here now. Danny probably called you right after you left your place."

Adele sneered. "You're as bad as he is with your lies. And of course I am here—am I expected to sit by the telephone, weeping like a shopgirl, for the rest of my life, waiting for Danny Ocean to call? Not Ekstrom. I have this invitation so I call up a frien' and have him bring me here. I t'rnk perrops that as Mrs. Restes is your mother and you are Danny Ocean's accomplice, he may be hidin' at this party." She looked around again. "I still t'ink he is, he is so good at hidin'."

"Cross my heart, he isn't," Foster said solemnly. As he brought his fingers across his chest he looked beyond Adele and saw Duke Santos emerge from the house, looking a bit better than when last seen. The man Natalie was bound on marrying swiveled his head, hunting somebody, and then went back inside.

And a great idea was born in Jimmy Foster's mind. Like a flash of light accompanied by pealing organ music it came to him that if he could somehow make Adele Ekstrom want Duke Santos for her own, how many problems would be solved! Danny would be free. The danger of Ekstrom finally getting so steamed at Danny's grasshoppering that she blew the top off the whole plan with what she knew plus deductions and guesses would be removed. Ekstrom devoted all her attentions to her man of the hour: once she fastened on the new, she had no time to remember the old—he was entirely gone from her mind. And if this stroke of genius succeeded, Natalie would be rid of the most deadly unpleasant husband-to-be she had yet taken on.

Of course the difficulties were enormous. Duke Santos was hardly one of the virile gents Adele was in the habit of falling for. Furthermore, Duke had a delicate stomach that precluded his being much of a lover. If cigarettes and booze were off Santos' list, something like Ekstrom must be banned in big black letters decorated with skulls and cross-bones. But Santos had sniffed in famishment at Jimmy's cigarette smoke, he had taken a drink although he knew the consequences, so there was a possibility that he would say what the hell again and have a go at *this* forbidden pleasure, too. It very possibly would be his last violation of doctors' orders, but Jimmy Foster asked himself, what would be wrong with that?

"What are you lookin' so happy about?" Adele asked. "You t'ink it is fonny because Danny lied to me, eh? Is that what makes you laugh, ho-ho, inside, Mr. Snakes-in-the-Hair?"

"No, no, of course not," Jimmy said hurriedly. "It's only that—well, I agree with you that Danny does treat you pretty shabbily, Adele."

"He is a skonk." Adele nodded.

"And why you keep on putting up with him, I don't know," Foster went on, "when you could have anybody—*anybody*—even that multi-millionaire I was just talking to who admires you so much."

Adele Ekstrom's glands, tissues and imagination reacted to the mention of big money almost as instinctively as they did to the sight of handsome young men. "Who is this multi-multis you speak about?" she demanded instantly. "He is here at this lousy party?"

"Oh, yes. I'd be glad to introduce you."

Adele looked about her, head up, testing the breeze for the scent of millions. Her calculating eyes swung back to Foster suddenly. "Why do you do this?" she demanded. "You're soch a friend of Danny Ocean's—why do you introduce his girl frien' to multi-multis?"

Foster looked down at his feet in boyish embarrassment. "Well, I thought I owed you something for that time I got drunk and said that Medusa thing about you," he explained. "I didn't know what I was saying, of course, but I know it hurt you and—well, this is just my way of making up for it, perhaps."

"Perrops not, too," Adele said. "We will see. Who is this so-rich man who admires me? What is his name?"

It was not until then that Foster remembered that his mother had suggested that Adele Ekstrom must have been on Duke Santos' invitation list, certainly not on hers. And if that was true, then—

But he had gone too far to fall back and regroup now so he made his pitch with a flourish. "Fascinating character, really," he told Adele. "Not one of your usual run-of-the-mill millionaires. Good-looking, highly respected in his own circles, and—"

"Who is he?"

"Well, Duke Santos," Foster blurted.

For a moment Adele Ekstrom stared at Jimmy in stark amazement. Then she threw back her head and sent her laughter pealing toward the heavens in a volume that brought all faces swinging toward her. She had trouble finding speech and she made three false starts, breaking down after a word or two each time, but when she finally got command of her rich and rolling voice she asked Jimmy Foster:

"You t'ink I have not known Duke Santos before this? My God, you stupid, how do you t'ink he became soch a wreck as he is, the poor old

man who thought he was soch a boy?"

Samson's temple must have made quite a noise when he brought it down, and the walls of Jericho couldn't have been any hushed whisper, either, but neither could have compared in thunderous collapse with the demolition of Jimmy Foster's great idea there beside the swimming pool that seemed to ripple under the gusts of Adele Ekstrom's merriment.

6

Jimmy was still shaken by his memories of his utter rout that evening when he was let into Spyros Acebos' Beverly Hills home by the houseboy, Lin.

"Everybody downstairs in playroom," the round-faced servant announced. "You know the way?"

Foster nodded and crossed the garish living room to the door leading to the basement. If basement was the word for it. Jimmy had been in the playroom once before and had been staggered by it: it probably was the only such setup that carried the pine-paneling motif to the underside of the seat in the john.

About the only steadying thing in this mélange of hideous bad taste was a pool table, and it was around this that Foster found most of "Ocean's Eleven"—bless old Mushy for that—grouped.

They were all there but Lou Jackson, and Lou could be depended upon to be late. That is, if he didn't wind up in some accident ward or jail.

Spyros Acebos was pacing the room apart from the others, his hands behind his back, his dark, vulturine face even more unhappy than usual, the ambulant Atlas with the world's worries bowing his shoulders. Danny Ocean perched on a bar stool with a glass in his hand, looking at nothing special, seeing everything. Roger Corneal and Curly Steffens were switching the TV back and forth between an old movie and a western; when the movie got too corny to bear they twisted the dial to the western and when that brand of violence palled they went back to the inanities of another era's Grade-B entertainment.

Foster gave Danny a nod and a wave and went to join the crowd at the pool table and shake hands with those men he had not seen in some time. Acebos shot the lieutenant a black glance and veered in his pacing so that he approached Danny.

"Well, I see Mr. High Society Playboy has condescended to join us," he growled. "Three minutes past nine and he strolls in here like he was ahead of time. And Jackson, he don't show at all. He won't,

either, no matter if you do say you've got everything fixed, nothing's going to happen to ruin everything."

Ocean sipped and smiled. "Relax, Spyros. Lou will be here in plenty of time. Depend on it."

Acebos snorted. "Some bunch of characters I got to depend on. Just listen to them, will you?"

"I been listenin'." Ocean nodded. "It makes me feel good. These are great guys and they're gonna get what they want, fin'lly. Hardly anybody ever gets what he really wants and here they are all set to grab off the things they'd think you were nuts a coupla weeks ago if you said they could have. Yeah, it makes me feel fine, Spyros."

"Thinking of your own cut don't exactly bring tears, does it?" the swarthy man jeered.

"No, I suppose that's the best part of it," Ocean admitted. "But just the same I'm glad this is an operation where the whole damn platoon, pretty near—the ones that wasn't knocked off or died since—they can get into the act. And each guy the right man for the job. We couldn't get a better gang of guys if we advertised; that's the thing that hits me."

Acebos cast his hooded eyes over the room. "Your pal Harmon don't look as happy as you do about things," he muttered. "How about him?"

Ocean looked over to the corner where Sam Harmon sat in a deep chair, one ankle on the other knee, his long hands tented under his chin, watching the men grouped about the pool table without actually seeming to see them.

Danny wondered, too; what about Sam? Harmon had answered his call, left a good spot in a good club without so much as taking his arrangements off the rack, because Danny's letter had said he was needed. Ocean's note had just hinted at what was cooking; it had concentrated on the fact that he needed his friend back in L.A. and it had been enough, as Danny had known it would be. And now that the pianist knew a little more about the thing and didn't like any part of it —even after he'd seen Bea and talked to her—old Sambo was still around; he hadn't walked out, gone back to Hawaii, no matter how much he might want to.

Ocean told himself that he was a real heel, dragging Sam into this when he'd known Sambo would hate the whole pitch. A right guy, a true friend, would have left Sam alone, never let him know the big deal that was going on, and later fixed it so he'd get a slice of the take, free, gratis. *Here's paying you back for your split of the eighty grand I blew on Foster's big stock-market deals, the eighty I told you was only twenty-four.*

Danny shook his head, finished his drink. It could never be worked any way but this way. Sam wouldn't take any dough anybody just handed him like that. There'd be questions about how much the liberated dough really was and somehow Danny couldn't make it, facing Sam if he found out he had been shorted by the guy he thought was his friend, the guy at the other end of the bazooka. No, if Sam was going to get the dough he had to be in on the whole bit.

Besides, Sam Harmon was Danny's good-luck charm. With Sam in the act, nothing could happen to Danny Ocean.

It had always been that way. Put Sam Harmon close to Danny Ocean and Danny couldn't miss. Growing up, nearly every break Danny had ever had had come when Sam was somewhere in the picture. It was funny: it was almost enough to scare a guy sometimes. Danny would be in a penny crap game in some back alley, down to his last three cents, the whole wad of eighty-nine cents shot, and Sambo would happen by and—bingo: Danny would start taking on all the other kids, the bets he faded would seven away, and when he got the dice he couldn't miss. But let Sam mosey along again and the luck would begin to turn and it was time for Danny Ocean to pick up his winnings and blow.

It was the same thing on a bigger scale when they got older. The trouble was that Sam wasn't around enough. He got a crumby job that kept him busy all day and he was taking piano lessons, besides, so he didn't have much time to hang out with Danny. Ocean had to go it alone too much and sometimes the going was rough. Without Sam there, things turned on Danny and bit him, but when he managed to get Harmon to stop making with the job and the piano and live a little, there was nothing that could top Danny Ocean. Oddball, dice, the track—they all behaved as if he owned them and the dough just fluttered in.

God knows he tried often enough to put Sam on a sort of retainer, get him to take a split of the winnings, but old Sambo never would go for it.

"But you'd be earnin' it," Ocean used to argue. "With you around I can buck anything. You're my rabbit's foot, man."

"I got work to do." Always the same tired reason. "I want to be something more than another guy's rabbit's foot, f'crissake."

"Y'think y'ore gonna play pianna for Paul Whiteman, maybe?"

"Maybe better'n that. Maybe Carnegie Hall."

"Stick with me, be my luck, and you can *buy* Carnegie Hall," Danny had cried. "It's all there waitin' to be taken, man."

But no use. And then, after a while, Danny's own luck had started to come in, not so solid as the luck Sam Harmon brought him, perhaps,

but still better than most people's. He had been going pretty good, a sleeper in the sixth here, a filled inside straight against three kings there, when the war came along. It was his luck that put Sambo in the same platoon with him; it was the luck Sam brought him that got them into so many kraut banks that had real dough in the vault. Sam had hated that, too, but he'd gone along with it because he was—well, he was Sam Harmon and the guy who had wanted him to go along with it was Danny Ocean. Pals. That time with the Tiger tank looking around the corner and Ocean trying to tear loose from Sam, leave him there to die—forget it.

Ocean mixed himself another drink, ignoring Spyros Acebos' frown, and turned on the bar stool again. He thought about Bea and how it would be when he showed her the money, the big money that would shut up all her questions from then on. Enough dough could keep a woman's trap shut for keeps, even Bea's.

Ocean's thoughts were interrupted by a click and sudden silence from the TV. Curly Steffens said: "Why am I sittin' here watchin' this crap? I got things to think about that make this movie stuff look sick. So this 1935 society broad wants love and happiness instead of dough, does she? She can have the love and happiness. When this is over I'm gonna get me a couple of Ferraris, one for uphill and one for downhill. Maybe even one for the straightaways, too. I'll cop every Grand Prix they run."

"Yeah, you and Lance Reventlow." Roger Corneal laughed. "Racing cars! Why don't you just go off a tall building? It's quicker."

"Well, what are you gonna do with yours, wise man?" Curly asked.

This is bad luck, Danny Ocean told himself, but he didn't stop it: he listened.

"I'm going to get together the Goddamedest circus that ever was," Corneal said quietly. "What they call the best in other shows will understudy my acts. You think Ringling has something with those showgirls and the tintex elephants? Huh, they'll be strictly a suitcase operation when I get mine. I'll hire Hemingway for an advance man. Picasso will do my posters. Even my monkeys will have pedigrees."

From the pool table came a jeering laugh. One of the cuemen straightened, a tall, thin, balding man with a lined face and a coiled-spring inner tension that was reflected in every move he made. This was Pete Rheimer, an artist in the handling of explosives, an oil-field shooter by trade, summoned here to lend his talents in another direction.

"Listen to 'em," Rheimer said. The cigarette in his mouth wobbled with his words. "All that dough and they're still workin'. Me, I'm layin' off. Not another day on the job for Pete Rheimer when he gets

his hands on that grease. I'm gonna get a fifty-foot Criscraft and I'm not even gonna put it in the water. I'll leave it in my driveway just to let the neighbors know Pete Rheimer don't care. Then maybe I'll give it to somebody—like the mailman."

Mushy O'Conners nodded in full recognition of the validity of Pete's ambition. He seemed to be the only one in the smoky room to whom it made sense.

"Y'wanna know what I'm gonna do with mine, hey?" the battered one asked. Nobody responded, but they all looked interested so he went on. "I'm gonna buy me a education. Maybe I'll go to Harvard or maybe Cornell. I'm gonna go to college till I know pretty near everything."

"Sure," somebody said. "Shake hands with Doctor O'Conners, P.H. and D."

Tony Bergdorf chalked the cue in his hands and smiled across the table at the big man with the cauliflower ears. "Tell you what, Mushy," he suggested. "I'm goin' to have enough to buy a college for my kid, accordin' to Roger, so s'pose I get one, and if Harvard or that other joint gives you a bad time, you just come over to my place and I'll take care of you. Cum—cum—cum lowdy or whatever the hell it is."

He put the chalk on the rail and looked down the table. "How about you, Vince? We ain't heard from you yet."

Massler studied the ceiling for a moment before he found his answer. "I wasted fifteen years watchin' Burt Lancaster get all the gravy," he said finally. "Anybody can see I got twice the muscle and four times the looks of that guy. With my dough I'm gonna produce my own pictures and star me and my wife, Sugar Face."

"Do a circus picture," Roger Corneal urged. "You can use my lot. That way we'll both make out on the publicity."

Danny Ocean found Spyros Acebos standing beside him, eying the dream builders sourly. "A roomful of millionaires I got," the pudgy man said. "So where's Jackson?"

"He'll be here," Danny said tonelessly. "I said he would, didn't I?"

"Hey, Lieutenant," Curly Steffens called across the room, "I ain't heard you spend a nickel yet."

"I've got it all planned, though," Jimmy replied. "I'm going to live on an island, like Harmon, only I'll *buy* mine."

"Big one or little one?" Steffens asked.

"Medium-sized; something not too ostentatious. Someday you'll look at the maps and you'll see Bermuda, Cuba, and right there, smack in the middle, that earthly paradise, Fostera."

"Sounds like a cough syrup," Rheimer jibed. "You can do better than that, Lieutenant."

"No," Foster said, "I've settled on Fostera—can't change now. I might even put in some natives called Fosterians, about four hundred of them."

"All females?" somebody asked.

"No, indeed, only three hundred and fifty. I'd need fifty men to keep the population up. All boy babies shipped out at birth. And a picturesque old chief whose job it'll be to make up interesting tribal customs such as when a girl gets to be sixteen, the Great White Father —that's me—enjoys *le droit du seigneur,* things like that."

"Drott de who?" Mushy asked.

"Something you'll learn when you go to Tony's university." Foster smiled. He turned toward Sam Harmon, still slouched in the deep chair. "How about you, Harmon?" he asked.

"I can answer that," Danny Ocean called from the bar. "Old Sambo is gonna hang up his hat on the longhair rack. He told me once he'd make Carnegie Hall—now you can take over the joint, huh, Sambo?"

Harmon's smile was very faint as he shook his head. "No," he said slowly. "No, I think I'll wait and see how things turn out. I'll wait till I get a dime or I don't before I spend it all. But don't you fellows mind me. Have fun."

There was a second's silence and Danny wondered again, what about Sam? Did he really have Harmon sewed up for this job? Was Sam so tied by his funny loyalty that he'd go along in something that was out of line with everything he believed in? Until now Ocean had been dead sure Harmon was in, regardless of how much he might hate the whole caper. Now, by his voice when he answered Jimmy Foster's question about spending the dough, too sourpuss to shoot a line of crap like about buying islands and colleges and junk, even for laughs, Danny wondered.

And if he don't throw in how am I going to keep Spyros from making sure he don't talk? Jesus, Sam knows too much—he can't back out now!

He won't, he assured himself. *Not old Sambo—he'll do anything for me. But if he does try to cut out I'll keep him in. I'll keep him in if I have to tell him that without him I'm dead, the whole deal is dead, and this is the last chance for Bea to be happy. Maybe I'll even remind him I saved his life that time Vince got the Tiger: he never suspected anything different. Yeah, I'd even do that to keep him from trying to cut out and getting himself knocked off for it. Besides, I* need *him.*

He swigged his drink. The upstairs door opened and the Chinese houseboy called down. "Misser Acebos, somebody to see Misser

Ocean."

"That's Lou," Danny told Spyros. He hollered up the stairs: "Tell him to come on down."

The white-coated Chinese came halfway down the stairs, darted a look back over his shoulder.

"Better you come up and speak with them, pliss, I think," he offered. "There is two policemen. Oh, very large policemen."

Danny's first reaction was an upsurge of black frustration. All the plans, all the preparations, the scheming that had hunted out and fixed every bug or chance for a bug had been made, the whole thing was one big, juicy pizza waiting to be gobbled, and here were the cops.

"The cellar door," Spyros Acebos muttered, perhaps to himself, perhaps to Ocean.

The squat, hooded-eyed racketeer began sliding away from Danny, away from them all, toward the rear door that led to the cellar proper. Mushy moved with him, unbuttoning his coat so his gun would be handy in case anybody tried to stop them. It was his job to stick with Mr. Acebos and while Mushy might regret deserting his friends, the guys he liked a million times better than Spyros Acebos, still a man did what he was paid to do.

Danny Ocean looked at Spyros, back up the stairs at the slant-eyed houseboy and beyond, then moved swiftly. He was off the bar stool and after Acebos; his hand caught the older man's sleeve and swung him about.

"No, you don't," he said in a low, tight voice. "You don't pull no run-out on us, Spyros."

"Let me go," Acebos spat.

"Look, Sarge," Mushy said. "It's like he said, let him go. I'd never forgive myself, but if you don't turn him loose I gotta make you, and I might have to hurt you, doin' it."

The men who had been grouped around the pool table moved slowly, purposefully, toward the three men near the cellar door. They still carried their cues; they were grim and silent, deadly silent.

Mushy looked over Danny's head and sighed. Chances were they wouldn't understand but when a guy hired out as a bodyguard he had to do his job, no matter what. If he dogged it, if he let the man he was protecting get hurt because he liked the guys doing the hurting and went light on them, his reputation was shot to hell. Usually the hurt guy's friends gunned him down, too, but that was beside the point. A guy's reputation was about the dearest thing he ever owned, even dearer than friendship with these guys of the old platoon, even Danny

Ocean.

So Mushy O'Conners pulled the gun from his waistband. Danny tried to beat his hand to it with a grab but Mushy flicked it away. "Don't, Sarge," he said quietly. "Just leave me and Mr. Acebos get through this here door and don't do nothin' crazy and it'll be okay."

"You're nuts," Danny cried. "You're both nuts. Spyros, listen. It ain't what you think. Two cops come to the door and ring the bell and ask to see me—you think they're wise? You think this is another Appalachin, maybe? Two uniformed cops comin' to the front door and askin' your Chink to see me?"

"A trick," Acebos said hoarsely.

"Okay, so it's a trick," Danny said. "So I go upstairs and if it's a grab, there I am. I can stall 'em long enough for you to do what you wanted to do in the first place, go through that door. But if it's what I think it is, somebody's gonna wonder why, when two cops come to see if I'm here, a friend of Lou Jackson's, the back door busts open and a bunch of guys run out of here—them that ain't layin' around here that Mushy put down with a lotta noise from a gun. It'll queer it, Spyros."

The chubby man with the sad face peered at Danny. "What did you say, the cops are looking for a friend of Lou Jackson?" he asked finally.

"Why, sure. This Lou is a character," Danny said. His grin was back, his old brashness had returned. "Ask any of the gang. He's always forgettin' addresses, gettin' outta cabs at the wrong place, wanderin' around knockin' on doors and askin' for whoever he's lookin' for. When he ain't in the hospital he's usually wanderin' around lost."

He appealed to the others. "You guys that know Lou, ain't that right?"

"Sure," Vince Massler said. "Leastwise that was the way he always was when I useta know him. Once he got lost goin' from the train gate down the ramp to the train that was waitin', or anyways that's what they say."

"This wanderer you've got to include in my plan?" Acebos moaned.

"Oh, Lou's a swell guy, boss," Mushy O'Conners said. "You get to know Lou, you'll like him as good as anybody you ever met." He beamed at the men he had been within a wrong word or a sudden move of shooting a moment before. "It'll be swell to see old Lou again, won't it, fellas?" he asked.

"If it is this Jackson," Spyros muttered. "We're taking Danny Ocean's word for it and meanwhile they may be completing the encirclement of this joint, the cops, the feds, the T's—maybe even the

Coast Guard."

"Oh, it's Lou, all right," Danny said with supreme confidence. But as he went up the stairs behind Lin the palms of his hands were wet and there was a feeling in the pit of his stomach he had not experienced since the war. In those days it had been simple fear for himself, fear of death, fear of pain, but now it was not that entirely. Now, perhaps even more than his dread that all this bright, exciting life with booze and broads and good living was going to be changed into something made out of wet-mopped concrete and the smell of creosote and echoing clangs that went through a guy's head, was the thought that this, the Big One, was through, finished, before it got off the ground.

This was to be the one that would solve all the problems, answer all the questions, make Bea happy forever, knock out all the bad days ahead, and if that wasn't Lou Jackson and a police lost-cowboy escort at the door, but a grab, it was all over before it had started.

How could they know? he asked himself, despite himself. *Who could have talked?*

There was only one answer, of course: Adele.

"God damn me," he murmured under his breath as he started across the living room, "for thinkin' I hadda talk because I couldn't—"

He choked off his own under-breath murmuring when he saw that there were only the two policemen, no Lou Jackson, in the doorway. They were, as Lin had warned, very large policemen.

Danny walked toward them, his smile easy, his body moving in all its accustomed fluid grace, and when he spoke nobody would have known that his throat was dry, his mouth bitter with the taste of defeat.

"Evenin', officers," he said. "You lookin' for me?"

If there was any difference in the height of the two policemen, the one who was taller by perhaps an eighth of an inch answered. He was red-faced, Irish, a beautiful example of perfect type casting. "Are you Danny Ocean, the best damn sergeant in the Eighty-sickint Airborne?" he asked.

The fear, the bile of terror and failure, left Danny with the cop's words. "Where is he?" he laughed. "Where did you find him?"

Both policemen's grins were much alike except that one had the advantage of a gold tooth. "Walkin' up and down the street a few blocks over," this man explained. "We watched him from the car for a long time, goin' up to houses and strikin' matches to read the numbers which they ain't many out this part of Biverly Hills. So finally we asked him who it was he was after and he said Sergeant Danny Ocean of the Eighty-sickint Airborne who was at Mr. Acebos' house so we

brought him here, knowin' Mr. Acebos' place, of coorse."

"Fine." Danny nodded. "Wonderful. Only where is he?"

Each policeman turned to the other as though expecting his partner to produce the man they had brought here. Then they both whirled and crammed through the open front door, out onto the porch.

"C'mon up outta there," Danny heard one roar. "Holy Mother of God, have ye gone and busted the other one, now, the minute we turned our backs on ye?"

"Ah'm perfectly all raat, Officer," Ocean heard Lou Jackson say from the darkness, to the right and below the steps. "Jes' took a wrong step somehow and got throwed into the bresh. But I landed on my other arm, my good one, though I kain't tell you how *that* happened."

The two big policemen plunged down the steps, then reappeared bearing Lou's lanky form between them. Danny Ocean saw that the tall Texan who called himself the best doggone rodeo rider if he could only stop busting things for long enough to get a couple of championships together had done it again.

Jackson wore tight levis and a checked shirt, boots with high heels run over on the sides, and a beautiful wide-brimmed hat. He was stringy, tanned, almost handsome, and he wore his right arm in a black sling.

"Hi, Sarge," he said calmly. "I got a little mixed up findin' you or I'd have been on time. Wasn't my fault, though."

"I know, Lou," Ocean said as casually. "The cabdriver didn't know the town and the street signs were all wrong."

Jackson smiled slowly. "Well, shore," he said. "How'd you know?"

"I'm psychic," Danny grunted. To the policemen he said: "How about a little drink, men? It's a cold night out."

They looked at each other, wishing the other out of sight, and then reluctantly shook their heads. "No, thanks," the larger one said. "We'd better be goin'. Another time, maybe."

"I shore thank you for he'pin' me out," Lou Jackson said mildly. "Nice of you."

The policemen left. Danny stood with his hands on his hips, looking at the black-cloth sling. "How bad is the arm?" he asked, his voice edgy. Most times Lou's slings and bandages were relics of injuries long since cured, badges of deeds long since done, but there was always the chance that this was a fresh break or wrench or sprain and if it was it was going to raise hell with the situation.

The cowboy looked down at his arm. "I tuk a fall offen a steer at Laredo," he explained. "Prett' near a compound fracture, the doctuh said. Got to rest it a long time, looks like."

"You didn't have it when we saw you in Salt Lake," Danny observed. "How come?"

"Well, I *had* it but it wasn't hurtin' me then. I guess I overworked it, sort of, and I had to put it back in a sling to ease the pain."

Ocean said: "You eased yourself outta a million clams if the pain's too much to work this little job."

Lou Jackson's arm promptly came out of the black-cloth envelope and stretched its lean length out toward Ocean. "Shake," the Texan said. "Well test 'er out. For a million dolluhs I reckon it can stand quite a bit."

The handshake was rock-hard and Lou Jackson showed no evidence of agony.

"You and your bandages," Ocean snorted. "Honest, Lou, you bug me sometimes."

Jackson shoved his ten-gallon hat toward the back of his narrow head and drawled: "Well, I reckon if I was altogether sensible I wouldn't be a rodeo rider in the first place. Maybe I wouldn't even be throwin' in with you, Sarge, on this loco idea if I was what a man would call sensible."

"It's not loco—" Danny began.

"I know, I know. You told me all about it in Salt Lake." Lou began unknotting the black scarf that had supported his "injured" right arm. "Gonna miss this thing," he said wistfully. "You'd be surprised, Sarge, how many of life's little sand spurs a man can miss pickin' up if he's got somethin' crippled about him. Folks treat him a lot kinder when he's got a sling or a crutch or somethin' like that."

He folded the scarf and stuck it in a hip pocket. "And I like folks to be as kind as they kin to me," he went on. "I bruise awful easy."

"Screwball," Danny snorted affectionately. "Come on, there's a bunch of guys downstairs that must be flippin', waitin' to find out why the law came knockin'."

"I'm the last one here, huh?" Jackson asked.

"Natch. Now I can lay it all out for the boys, explain how it works, get their reaction."

Lou Jackson thumbed his jaw reflectively. "Ain't it kinda late for anybody to come up with a no, Sarge?"

"Nobody's gonna say no," Danny said fiercely. And his inner voice shouted: *You can't turn me down now, Sam. It's too late.*

CHAPTER FIVE...

1

Ocean spread the map on the pool table while the others clustered around. Big, blunted Mushy. Tony Bergdorf with his worm chewing at him again, but not too ravenously right now. Roger Corneal with his carny clothes and his carny complexion and the impossibly big diamond on the hand he spread at the tables rim. Josh Howard, the one-eyed Negro who played the harmonica and danced and never let the world see the scars that society, no Nazi shell, had left in casual inflictions. Sam Harmon, who loved Bea and Danny. Curly Steffens, fat and bald but alive despite all the pile ups, the roll overs, on the tracks he dreamed of someday conquering, the best of all instead of a back-in-the-ruck race driver. Pete Rheimer with nerves that jangled except when he held nitroglycerin in his hands. Vince Massler, who hoped never again to have to see his wife's nakedness heaving and squirming before the eyes of strangers.

And, standing apart from the others, Spyros Acebos, out of whose prison-cell cogitations had come the germ of this whole scheme, who knew that of all the dark plans shaped during his dark past, this was the one that would make him a legend. He would not see it fail, or, if it failed, the one responsible for that failure would be made to pay. And that would be Danny Ocean, whom Spyros Acebos hated.

"Okay, guys," Danny was saying, "here's the whole layout. You know what this map is, don't you?"

"Sure," Curly said. "It's printed right up there in the corner—Las Vegas, Nevada."

"And Clark County." Danny nodded. "Or, anyway, the county right around the Vegas strip, the power lines, the city dump."

"The city dump?" somebody asked.

Ocean nodded again. "Yeah. Now this map of the city's got everything we're interested in spotted real plain, especially the casinos."

His finger stabbed at the paper, the eyes of the others following. "These are the five we'll hit, the Sahara, the Riviera, Desert Inn, the Sands, the Flamingo."

He looked around the table slowly. "We figure to liberate about two million in each one of 'em," he said.

There was a shuddery inhalation. Somebody muttered: “Ten million bucks.” The voice was freighted with awe.

Ocean waited a moment before he went on. “You all know when we hit—New Year’s Eve, midnight on the dot. We told most of you guys this stuff when we were linin’ you up but maybe we oughta go over it again.”

His eyes made another tour of the circle of faces. Everyone at the table wore eager expectancy except one man, Sam Harmon. The pianist kept his faint troubled frown.

“How about you, Sam?” Ocean shot at his friend. “You got a question you wanta ask now or will it keep till I’m through?”

“Maybe you’d better dear it up for me now, Danny,” Harmon said slowly. “It’s been bothering me ever since I got your letter. How come you got the platoon together, spent all that dough getting us here, instead of hiring some professional heist guys? Do you want to keep the money in the family that much, Danny?”

“I can explain that,” Spyros Acebos broke in. “According to my plan __”

“Our plan,” Ocean broke in. “Your main idea, my details.”

For a moment it appeared that Acebos might lash out at the younger man, try to take back the command he had lost soon after Danny Ocean had appeared on the scene. But the swarthy racketeer let his eyes drift around the table: the answering stares he got from the men he had wanted to run out on at the first threat of danger, a few minutes earlier, were not reassuring.

Acebos hunched his shoulders, forced his mouth into something probably meant to be a smile. “So let’s not quibble,” he said, and moved back away from “Ocean’s Eleven.”

“Answering your question, Sambo,” Danny went on, “the first reason is because a guy with a criminal record can’t get near Las Vegas, much less the casinos.”

“Oh-oh,” Tony Bergdorf exclaimed. “Why didn’t anybody think of it? That lets me out.”

“Nuts,” Ocean snorted. “You’re no hood. The Vegas people have a line on the bad boys, sure, but they don’t keep records on every guy that ever took a first-time fall, for God’s sake.”

He turned back to Harmon. “In the second place, a big time pro like we’d need in an operation like this is always yakkin’ to other pros, I don’t care who he is. You hire a guy to do a job in, say, Boston, and you’re lettin’ guys you never heard of, guys here in L.A. or Miami or New York or Chicago, in on it. The word never spreads faster than when a pro does somethin’ big. He can’t any more keep it to himself

than he can fly."

Ocean's voice was intense, his eyes on Sam's were burning. Harmon marveled. Danny, who usually played it so cool, who laughed at everything and everybody, who called serious people clydes, squares, jerks, was giving this the hard sell.

"Sure," Ocean was saying, "these guys claim they do their talkin' only over the grapevine and nobody but the people who're with it can listen in. But there's always a leak, a stoolie, and they always wind up in the shit house. This way, no talk, no leaks, no stoolie, no shit house. With us, nobody will ever know."

He waited for Sam to say something further and when Harmon remained silent, the frown still there, he went back to his explanation.

"Now, we're goin' to Vegas. Not altogether, accourse; we'll infiltrate. There'll be jobs waitin' for some of you guys in those casinos." He held up a hand to quiet the stir created by this announcement. "Don't get excited: you're not gonna be croupiers or dealers or nothin' like that. You're gonna be porters."

"This is a way to make a million bucks?" Corneal asked in mock anguish.

"How'd you like to be a garbage-truck driver, mullion?" Josh Howard laughed. "That's the way Vince and I are earnin' our million. Hard work, too."

"Don't go lookin' down at these porters' jobs," Ocean cautioned. "They weren't easy to fix."

"How'd you work it?" Rheimer asked curiously. "I always heard those casino guys were the cagiest there was when it came to hiring help. And you're moving five guys into five casinos, just like that, even with a mop and a broom?"

"If I may be permitted to speak," Spyros Acebos said from outside the ring of veterans. "This I think even Mr. Ocean will admit is my work. I arranged it, and how I did and who was my Vegas man I will never tell. I will only say it was expensive, which is one of the reasons I had to give back my beautiful cars to the Easy Finance Company, if anybody is interested in knowing."

The faces that had swung toward Acebos returned to Danny. Ocean gave a grudging nod. "Well, yeah, Spyros fixed that part of it. He tells me it's all set. All you have to do is ask for the job and you go to work."

He looked down the table toward Massler. "Vince, we changed your spot. We had to put you on the garbage-route bit to be sure it was one of our boys that got all the five casinos. Now that Josh has got that route sewed up, you're movin' into a casino as a porter, Vince."

"After all them garbage cans," Massler mourned. "Just when I was gettin' the hang of how to lift 'em without breakin' my back or spillin' last night's club-steak dinner all over me."

"Maybe it'll come in handy, boy." Josh chuckled. "In case somethin' happens and we don't wind up millionaires, you'll always have a job with Southern Nevada Disposal. I heard the boss say jus' the other day that you're one of his *best* men."

"Nothin's gonna happen," Ocean said sharply. "Let's cut out that kind of crap right now. Like I said, Vince, you're movin' into the Sands as a porter. Roger, you go to the Flamingo. Pete Rheimer takes the Desert Inn."

"On top of the other?" Pete asked.

"You're gonna be hard at work emptyin' ash trays in the Desert Inn when she blows," Danny said. "Ain't that the way you want it?"

Rheimer nodded. Curly Steffens asked: "You got me down for a casino, Sarge? I always wanted to see one of them headline shows like they got. I figure maybe if I catch Tony Bennett or Sinatra or Dean Martin or one of them fellas I can probly steal somethin' I can use in my own show."

"You're not goin' back to that scratch house, remember?" Ocean asked. "But, yeah, you got a casino, the Riviera. Mushy, you're in the Sahara."

The ex-fighter looked at Acebos, surprise in his little eyes. The Greek nodded and O'Conners beamed. "Why, sure, Sarge," he said. "It'll be like old times, takin' my orders from you again."

"Only until the minute the job is over," Spyros Acebos said softly. "Then you'll be working for me again, Mushy."

The big man stifled a sigh as he nodded. It would be nice to keep on working for the sergeant instead of Acebos but that wasn't the way it was going to be. He hoped nothing went wrong so that Mr. Acebos would get sore at Danny.

"That takes care of five of us," Corneal said. "What about the others?"

"They'll be floaters, workin' with the inside guys in two-man teams, movin' from place to place. Of course, Josh stays with the truck."

Sam Harmon stirred uneasily. "I guess I came in late," he said. "You others seem to know a lot more about the setup than I do. Okay, so you're going to knock off five casinos for ten million clams or so. What happens if somebody says no? What do you do, show 'em your Diners' card?"

The others looked at Harmon in surprise. Danny Ocean's best friend and he hadn't been let in on the details they'd all been given before

they came here? How come? The faces swung back to Ocean, and Danny had his easy explanation ready.

"It's like you said, Sambo: you came in late," he told the pianist. "Since you got here I ain't had a chance to lay it all out for you. Anyways, I knew we'd be talkin' it over tonight so I let it slide."

Because you knew I'd kiss out, Harmon said silently, bitterly. *You kept it until you had me here with the others and said enough so any chance to get out was gone. So you think so, do you?*

"Here it is, then, Sam," Ocean was saying. "You've worked in Vegas. Tell me, what do they do there on New Year's Eve?"

"Come midnight, they go nuts, of course," Harmon replied. "The lights go down and everybody kisses anybody. Then they sing 'Auld Lang Syne' or a reasonable facsimile."

"How long would you say it takes to sing 'Auld Lang Syne'?" Ocean asked.

"How long? Hell, I don't know. Maybe about—"

"One minute and thirty-eight seconds," Danny cut in. "We've timed it forty thousand times. So at one minute and thirty-eight seconds past midnight we black out the whole town and hit the five casinos, all at once. Nobody'll even see us."

Harmon looked about him. Everybody else in this crowd seemed to be taking this cockeyed explanation quite calmly. Were they all hypnotized? He knew Danny was good at convincing people, but this good?

"Okay," he said, after the pause. "So you're going to black out Las Vegas. With slingshots, maybe? Or are you going to blow a half a million fuses all at once with Captain Midnight's death ray?"

"No, Mister Bones," Danny said. "We're goin' to knock over this tower here"—with a forefinger stabbing the map—"that supports the main power cable. We're gonna blow it up. Rather, Pete Rheimer's doin' the blowin', with a coupla O.S.S. type bombs. He'll handle 'em—personally. I never touch the stuff."

"Just like that, huh?" Harmon asked. "I guess you don't know the casinos—"

"I know, man, I know," Ocean interrupted. "Blowin' the tower will short out the cable as soon as it hits the ground. But like you were goin' to say, each casino has its own power plant for emergencies. You think we're goin' into this thing blind, maybe?"

The pianist hunched his shoulders. "I don't know whether it's blind or just dumb," he said. "The way I get it is you figure to get into those cashiers' cages—and nobody gets in unless the cashier pushes the button, m'friend—and haul out two million bucks in each place

between the time the main cable blows and the auxiliary power comes on."

He shook his head. "I want to tell you, Danny, it can't be done. I worked those places. There were plenty of times when a thunderstorm or something would knock out the main power line. Those auxiliary dynamos or turbines or whatever you call 'em had the lights back on inside of a minute, at the most."

"In twenty seconds, to be exact," Ocean agreed.

"Twenty seconds!" Sam exploded. "What in hell do you think you can do in twenty seconds?"

"We're gonna have a lot more than twenty seconds, Sambo." Ocean turned toward Bergdorf. "Tell him, Tony."

Bergdorf had time to thank God that Ocean had not shot his order at him a minute earlier. Then, Tony had been in the full clutch of his pain; if he had been able to speak at all it would have come out as a squeak or a groan. The worm (call it serpent, now) had stopped chewing at him and he might be weak and scared but he could summon a voice that wouldn't betray him. Anybody who knew him well, Bernice or the kid, for instance, would know something was wrong but these guys, except Corneal, had no reason to think this wasn't the way he always talked.

"What the sergeant's gettin' at," he told Harmon, "is that, like you said, the auxiliaries kick in right after the main line blows out. So what if somebody gimmicks the switch box in each casino? When the auxiliaries kick in twenty seconds after the main line's knocked out by Rheimer's blast, what if all they do is unlock the cashiers' cages? The lights stay out, there ain't one drop of juice in the whole joint except the lines that're gimmicked to open the cages."

There was a silence and then Mushy O'Conners giggled. "All that extra electric machinery," he said, "just to make it easy for us. I get a bang outta thinkin' about it. Them guys, the owners, sittin' there in the dark, sayin' don't worry, our expensive power plant is gonna work in twenty seconds, and then it does, only for us it flings wide the portals, as the feller says."

"It *what?"* Jimmy Foster cried.

Mushy's face wore a curious blend of pride and hurt. "Jeez, don't you think I know *nothin'?"* he asked Foster. "I can read."

"Fling wide the portals," Foster murmured. "Now I've heard it all." Of Sam he asked: "Does what Danny and Tony have told you answer your questions, Harmon?"

"No, not quite," the pianist said. "There's still the big one—two big ones. If you do manage to keep all the lights off, if you do spring all

the cashiers' cage doors, how are you going to see to operate without the roof falling in on you? I mean, even a casino security cop will figure that something's not kosher after a couple of minutes and the auxiliary lights don't go on. So you're going to use flashlights, maybe, to get the dough out of those cages? And what are the cops going to be doing, just standing there and letting you clean house?"

"That's the beauty part of the whole operation," Spyros Acebos said from outside the immediate circle. "You heard, maybe, about infrared paint? The ones we're going to have working in those casinos as porters will paint everything that needs painting with that stuff. When the lights go out and our boys come in with the glasses that make you see that stuff where nobody else can, they'll be the only ones that can move around. For everybody else it'll be blackness but for us it'll look like the Freeway—go here, go there, bear left for Pismo Beach. It'll be like having eyes when all the rest of the world is blind."

Everybody looked at Sam Harmon. All the men about the pool table, Mushy, Pete, Curly, were as proud of Acebos' revelation as though they, themselves, were responsible for it. Sam's eyes stayed on the green baize for a moment and then came up to meet Danny Ocean's triumphant stare.

"You're good, Danny," he murmured grudgingly. "Who else would think about the infrared-paint possibilities? How do you get time to think up all these things between getting your bets down and taking care of your women?"

"You don't read the right magazines." Ocean grinned back. "You're always wastin' your time on *Downbeat* when you could be improvin' your mind with the higher-type stuff, like Dick Tracy."

The laugh rippled around the table. Sam Harmon was not through: he leaned forward and put a forefinger on the heavy line that curved from the map's border to the outskirts of Las Vegas. "This is the only road in or out of Vegas, right?" he asked.

"Uh-huh." Ocean nodded. "Route Ninety-one."

Sam said: "I read once about this guy in Perth that cut up his grandmother and mailed her out of town. Everything went fine till he ran out of stamps."

"Which proves something crucial?" Spyros asked.

Harmon turned to look at the swarthy racketeer. "Uh-huh. Getting the money in your hands is one thing and getting it out of town is another."

"You don't have to worry about that," Jimmy Foster said. "We won't have to go near a post office, not even a stamp-vending machine. That's all taken care of."

“Lootenant?” Curly Steffens asked.

“Yes?”

“How long can we depend on it stayin’ dark?”

Foster said: “We figure between ten and fifteen minutes. Possibly more, but the sergeant says keep things to conservative minimums.”

“Ten or fifteen minutes ain’t such a hell of a long time, is it?” Curly asked.

Danny’s voice carried complete conviction. “It’s twice as much as we need as long as every one of you guys do what you’re supposed to do. Unless somebody fouls up we can walk through this exercise. And nobody better had foul up.”

Spyros had been too long outside the main council of war; now he thrust himself between Rheimer and Massler to gain a position at the edge of the table.

“Danny’s right,” he proclaimed. “You should all move like clockwork, seventeen jewels. I want you should think of this as a full-fledgling battle. Leap into it with the same high-type hearts that carried you across the Rhine River and other historical places. Think how proud all the Big Brass in the Pentagon would be, could they but know that their labors made all this possible.”

He looked around the table and came as close to beaming as a man like Spyros Acebos possibly could. “So, hooray, I say, for the Pentagon and the Eighty-second Airborne and in particular you gentlemen who are going to make history with the biggest heist anybody ever heard of.”

“Uh-huh,” Danny Ocean said acidly, “hooray for us.” He shut off any further oratory Acebos might have in mind by asking: “Has anybody got any more questions before we wind this up?”

Sam Harmon had his eyes pinned on the Greek across the table from him. “I’m still there with the question marks, kid,” he told Danny. “What’s Mr. Acebos’ job in this setup? Is he going to be a porter or is he going to float around, helping out here and there?”

Spyros drew himself up to his full height, looking hurt. “After all, a man of my years, I’m not a rooster for an action like this,” he said.

“You’re not that old,” Sam said briefly.

“Besides that—”

“You won’t be there; that’s what it boils down to, doesn’t it?” Sam cut in. “When this hits the fan you’ll be far, far away. As far away as you can get.”

Acebos puffed out his cheeks as the others looked at him. “You got to remember I had the idea in the first place,” the racketeer complained. “The whole original conception.”

"And that entitles you to blow." Sam nodded. "Don't forget to leave a forwarding address. Somewhere where you can wait in comfort for your check in the mail."

"Now, just a minute, young fellow," Spyros rapped out. "Don't get sarcastic with me. From the very first time I saw you I said to myself, that guy ain't for me. You got the Boy Scout look that I don't like in an operation of this kind. And now you got the nerve to criticize me for —"

"Okay, *okay,"* Danny Ocean cut in harshly. "Let's knock it off." He looked at Harmon, his mouth thinning. "Sam, you're outta line. Spyros happens to be a known felon; that's why he's not goin' to Vegas with us. They get one look at him up there and the whole thing goes down the drain. And in case you don't think he deserves his split, remember the original idea *was* his. Besides, he set up the business of gettin' our boys into those casinos as porters and if we didn't have that we'd be nowhere."

The two men locked eyes and it was Sam who shrugged, looked away. Danny hesitated a moment and then made his voice brisk.

"So I guess we've got it all straight now," he said. "No more questions, are there?" He barked a hard, clipped laugh. "Nobody wants to declare himself out of a million clams, is there?"

And then Sam Harmon said: "I guess I do, Danny."

Perhaps they had all been expecting it because it caused no surprise consternation. They all knew Sam; they knew this was not his kind of work. At one time or other all of them must have asked themselves what would happen when Sam Harmon, brought into this deal by Danny Ocean's insistence, declared himself out, knowing what he would know when he headed for the exit.

They looked at him, their eyes blank or hostile or sympathetic. Sam Harmon never had been the most popular guy in the platoon. A couple of the men—none of this group but guys who had been listened to while they lived—had wondered if maybe Sam Harmon didn't have a trace of purple in his blood, he was always so kind and forgiving, so much like a woman in a lot of ways. Not that anybody thought he was queer but—well, he sure was a funny guy to be Danny Ocean's best pal.

So now this strange Sam Harmon had laid it on the line and he might as well be holding a gun to his own head and getting ready to pull the trigger. The men around the pool table wondered if Sam could be that simple that he thought he could live long, refusing to throw in when he knew what he knew now.

And not a man there, either, who could find it in himself to say let him go, we'll take our chances on him keeping his mouth shut. Tony

Bergdorf, with his time running out and this last chance to leave his kid something? Rog Corneal, with the biggest top of all rising on the lot just over the horizon? Josh Howard, who had an idea of the difference a million dollars would make in how the world looked at a man's skin?

Spyros Acebos, maybe? Spyros had suspected for some time that this might happen and he had made his dark and secret preparations. His orders would be carried out in such a way that Danny Ocean would not know until after New Year's Eve, after the Big One was history, but those orders were explicit.

Vince Massler was the first to speak and all he could blurt was: "Wait a minute!"

"It's okay, Vince," Ocean said. "The man wants out, that's all."

"But he can't!" Vince cried.

"Yes, I can," Harmon said quietly. "Watch me. I'm going to finish this drink"—he raised a glass that had a shallow swallow left in it —"and leave." He looked over at the bar. "Okay with you, Danny?" he asked pleasantly.

Spyros Acebos said harshly: "You ain't only asking Danny things now, Harmon. You should be asking if it's all right with *us."*

Sam turned toward Acebos. He had worn a frown all evening but now his face was smooth and smiling. "Okay, fat boy," he said. "Is it all right with you, then?"

"No, it ain't," Spyros said.

"Well, that," Sam Harmon said, "is too Goddam bad."

Sam turned back to Danny Ocean, the real leader of this crowd. "I'm sorry to crap out like this, Danny," he said, "but I don't have the vigorish for this job. And it's not only because I know the odds are with the house; it's because I was with you in one liberation operation and I didn't make out so good. I think I'd make out even worse in this one."

Ocean spoke from between stiff lips. "You sayin' I screwed you on the German marks we liberated?" he asked.

"No,"—Sam smiled—"but I wound up broke, just the same. How much did we take the banks for—twenty-four grand, wasn't it? And you invested my half in—ahh, to hell with it. I just think I'd do better and live longer playing the piano somewhere."

"Why didn't you decide this back in Hawaii?" Jimmy Foster asked curiously. "You must have known—"

"He came because I asked him to come," Danny Ocean broke in.

"Natch." Harmon smiled. "A friend asks a friend to sit in on a game and bring him luck so how can a guy refuse? But when he sees the

kind of a game they're dealing, even a buddy-buddy type friend can get up and walk out, can't he?"

He looked around the circle of faces that belonged to men he had fought with, men who might once have depended on him to cover them, keep them alive, while they scrabbled across a pockmarked field to a crumbling stone wall that was their immediate salvation. Not one of the answering stares showed a spark of understanding, friendliness.

Sam drained his drink, set it down firmly, and turned to walk toward the stairs.

"Don't go, Sam," Danny Ocean said gently. "I need you, baby."

Harmon said something brief and bitter and kept on walking. Mushy O'Conners unbuttoned his coat again, watching Spyros Acebos for the nod, the gesture, that would keep this swell guy, this gentle man, from walking out of there.

"But, Jesus, Danny," Vince Massler cried. "You saved his life that time! The tank was gonna run you both down and you coulda got outta there but you stayed with Sam. Lucky I came along with the grenade—otherwise you'd have got it along with him. And he does this to you now?"

Ocean swayed with the relief that coursed through his tired body. Vince had done it for him. Sambo could never leave now.

He went through with the act. "So he owes me nothin'," he said lightly. "A guy does crazy things in combat; we all know that. You pinnin' medals, Vince?"

"No, but—"

"All right." The voice of Sam Harmon came low and dragging from the foot of the stairs. "All right."

He came back and went to the bar, picked up a bottle and poured liquor into a glass.

"All right," he said again. "I'm in. But, oh, my God, I wish I wasn't."

2

Later, after they had put all the pieces of the puzzle together, the police and the FBI and the other law-enforcement agencies that entered the case, all said it was a freak operation that never could be duplicated in a million years; not with what the casino operators had learned from this one. But at the time it was relatively simple.

First, the "porters" carried bug bombs of infrared paint and when the security guards were looking the other way they sprayed the sills, jambs, and knobs of the cashiers' cages in each of the five selected casinos with the stuff. It was invisible to the ordinary eye: there was no way of detecting it unless a person equipped with a pair of glasses

made to see infrared markings happened along, and in all the holiday mob that jammed Las Vegas that year there was nobody wearing that kind of glasses.

Tony Bergdorf had the most ticklish job, and moving him from switchboard to switchboard in the casinos was the most delicate part of the operation. But while, at the time, security cops kept close watch on people suspected of feeding slugs into the slot machines or running in queer dice, they paid little or no attention to what went on around the power switchboard. The nerve center of the casino's wiring system usually was a small room off a lower hallway, kept locked but with a lock that a child could have opened with a Boy Scout knife. Whichever "porter" worked with Bergdorf in the gimmicking was equipped with something a lot easier to handle than a Boy Scout knife, a key made from a wax impression the "porter" somehow had found time to arrange.

It was a very touch-and-go thing because Tony could not set the auxiliary power lines to trip the locks of the cashiers' cages (and *only* do that) before nine o'clock New Year's Eve. Danny had fixed that time as the limit on risking a bona-fide power failure before midnight, an unlucky breakdown that would give the whole deal away. Tony, therefore, had to be whisked in and out of the casinos by the "porters" and floating operatives, and in the whisking some ingenious ways were used to detract the attention of the guards.

In one place Danny dropped a twenty-dollar chip with a spin that carried it right under the feet of a security cop. As the officer bent to retrieve the chip, Ocean walked up close to him so that the security man, straightening, was thrown off balance by Ocean's shoulder. There were mutual apologies, laughs, Danny's profuse thanks, and when it was all finished Tony Bergdorf was inside the switchboard room.

Getting Tony out was more involved. Lou Jackson, resplendent in a new black cowboy outfit, began an impromptu roping exhibition not far from the cop nearest the switchboard-room door. The security man watched indulgently while Lou lassoed a stout matron who squealed and protested rapturously while her husband grinned weakly. The guard decided that even New Year's Eve fun had to be kept within certain bounds when Lou demanded ransom in the form of a kiss, "a sure-'nough ear buzzer," and the husband began huffing. The cop broke it up, Lou apologized and led the couple off for another drink, and while all the commotion was going on Tony Bergdorf came out of the switchboard room, mission accomplished, and was steered to the next casino by Danny Ocean and taken over by another "porter," Mushy O'Conners.

Sam Harmon sat at the piano in one of the smaller rooms of the casino where a playing date had been so mysteriously arranged. The place was packed but it was New Year's Eve and most of the customers were too busy heading for an exhilarated state they had promised themselves to reach by twelve o'clock to do much listening either to Harmon's playing or singing.

He played what pleased him, not necessarily what the customers wanted, and his face was incongruously somber. Usually, when he played a spot, no matter how noisy or rude the clients, he wore a smile that eventually conquered even the most antagonistic audience; he projected his very real love of people, bathed the customers in it until they succumbed to his charm and responded. Now he didn't care. This was the one shot to end all one shots. Oh, he had been told that he would have to appear at this lounge the next night and the next, until the date ran out, so things would look right, just as the "porters" would keep on emptying ash trays and mopping up spilled drinks for a few more days, but tonight really was the end of the line for Sam Harmon and he knew it.

After tonight he'd be a thief, no matter on how grand a scale. Sure, he'd liberated a lot of money from those Nazi banks, he and Danny, but somehow that hadn't seemed like stealing, not really. He'd hated the whole idea but he never had fully analyzed the reasons for his repugnance; he had been half convinced that mostly it was because he hadn't wanted to waste time with Danny doing that when the bazooka could have been put to better use in the attack, helping out the other guys in the platoon.

But after tonight there would be no kidding himself. He would be part of a mob that heisted something like ten million dollars, certainly one of the biggest, if not the biggest, job in criminal history. Oh, it was a hundred-to-one shot that he would be caught eventually—that they'd all be caught—but even if the miracle happened and he wasn't, he would have had it.

You kill another guy and it's war and nobody blames you; you're a hero if you kill enough of them single-handed. You steal dough from a kraut bank and everybody laughs and says to forget it, anything you liberated from those guys they probably stole themselves in the first place; your own conscience goes easy on you because you didn't get to spend any of that money, did you? Not even your half of the twenty-four G's that Danny Ocean said was the total take, not the eighty grand that it really was. You could rationalize a lot of things, murder in war, theft in war, but how were you going to rationalize this?

Answer: you couldn't. Loyalty to the guy who had saved your life wasn't enough. Love for Bea was no excuse: this would do Bea no

good. Sam knew he might as well stop kidding himself about going into this to help Danny get a lot of money so he and Bea would live happily ever after. With forty million Danny Ocean would still be Danny Ocean and, being Danny, he'd hurt Bea.

So why hadn't he kept on walking out of Spyros Acebos' crazy playroom? Had it really been Vince Massler's indignant mention of the time Danny had straddled his body, pinned in the wreckage, and faced a Tiger tank with his bare hands, nothing more, rather than desert his friend? Sure, that was the reason he had turned back. Of course it was.

Or had it been the faces of the other men that had stared back at him when he had told them he was quitting, the faces that showed him nothing but hate and fear? Or had it been the black menace in the scowl of the swarthy hoodlum, Spyros Acebos, who sure God would at least have tried to stop him before he got very far with what he knew.

Level with yourself, buster. Which was it that made you say all right, all right, I'm in?

His mouth twisted in a silent chuckle. What difference did it make now? He was in, a part of the heist mob, and within a couple of hours the lights were going to go out and the great big operation would either succeed or fail. The infrared paint had been squirted, the men who would hit the cashiers' cages had all their equipment ready. Pete Rheimer had time-bombed the power transmitter tower. All that remained was for the hands of the clock to tick their way around to the appointed time.

His own part was a very minor one: when the robbery of this casino was going on he was required to keep playing, keep the people in this lounge nearest the cashiers' cage occupied with their happy, drunken singing of "Auld Lang Syne." One more time, until Danny and Mushy, the two who would raid this particular spot, would be gone with their money.

Sam was not especially glad of the fact that he had been omitted from the action at the cashier's cage. He knew he had been brought into this operation chiefly because Danny Ocean had the idea that he brought Ocean luck and he knew, too, that Spyros Acebos still had enough to say about how this thing was to be run to have vetoed his presence in the cage during the big heist. Spyros feared an acute attack of Boy Scoutism at the wrong time, but he should not have worried about that happening. Sam Harmon had surrendered his principles, all the things he had believed in, at the foot of the stairs leading up and out of that Beverly Hills playroom.

He looked up from the keyboard and around the jam-packed lounge. Scraps of conversation came to him through the babble, over the sound of his own expert, lifeless playing.

—I want to see the show. You promised me.

—I know I did but a guy fell down on me. I couldn't get you into the Flamingo Room tonight for a million bucks. I'd need a gun or somethin'.

—A double this time, waiter. Your singles keep leaking.

—I know, sir. It's the cheap glass they're putting out these days.

—Hap-py New Year!

—Get your hand away from there, you slob; there's still a couple of hours to go.

—So you got a time lock on it?

—Well, here we are, Mother. Las Vegas on New Year's Eve. Who'd ever have thought it? Havin' a good time?

—Ay-yuh, Pa. But I wish there wasn't so much drinkin'.

"Hello, Mr. Sam Harmon."

There was an accent to the voice that made the hair on Sam's neck rise and prickle. He knew that voice. It was the voice of Trouble, in the form of a six-foot-three blonde with a magnificent bosom and a reputation for strewing her wake with rack and ruin.

Harmon nodded, his eyes on the keyboard. "Hello, Miss Ekstrom," he said, and half-turned to give her his best professional smile. "Nice seeing you. Big night, huh?"

"It will be bigger before it is ofer," Adele said. She wore a black sequin gown that was cut to the navel in front and (although Sam did not see this until later) squared off just above her rounded croup in back. Her heroic breasts were almost entirely exposed, thin strips of sequined cloth just covering the buds, and Harmon was struck by the thought that if Pa and Mother were taking this in they would have something to remember for the rest of their lives, even if the tower didn't blow up at midnight.

One look at Adele Ekstrom told Harmon that milady was very drunk. She had not lost any clearness of eye, any faultlessness of complexion, but she swayed like a Norwegian fir as she looked down at him.

"I finish this set at the end of this number," Sam said cheerfully, smothering his near-panic. "How about having a New Year's Eve drink with me?"

Adele considered this and shook her head carefully. "No," she announced. "I would like to haff a drink wit' you, Mr. Harmon. I would like to haff more than a drink wit' you, Mr. Harmon. But you are Danny Ocean's frien' and I must tell you that I haff cut the t'roat of that skonk, but good."

Sam played louder and faster. "I've Got You Under My Skin." Cole Porter. Light. Clever lyrics. They don't write songs like that any more.

What in God's name has she done?

"Not too bloody, I hope?" He laughed.

"No," Adele explained. She seized the edge of the piano to keep her balance. "I don' mean I took a knife and stab him, the little bostard. No, I haff heard w'ere he is trying to get his simple little wife to come back to him. So w'en I hear he is in Las Vegas and he has told me he would be in Texas over the holidays, I pick up the telephone and I call her."

Sam kept his hands moving. Sam kept smiling. Sam kept his right foot depressing the soft pedal at the right moments.

"You called who?" he asked.

"I call his wife, of course," Adele said. "The great Danny Ocean has told me he is in Texas and he is here in Las Vegas with some woman. He leaves me to sit by the telephone like a shopgirl and weep while he comes here with another woman. So"—she straightened and inhaled dramatically—"so if I cannot haff him, neither will he haff this little wife he is double-crossing, like me, either. I fix him, the little bostard. I cut his t'roat good."

Got to get to Danny. Got to tell him Adele's in town and that she's called Bea.

"Stick around for a drink," he suggested easily. "It's awhile to midnight, and maybe we can—"

"No," said Adele Ekstrom. "I lef' a party in the Flamingo Room w'en I hear you are playing here. I jus' wanted to tell you how good I have fix Mr. Danny Ocean, for keeps."

With that she turned and walked off, not exactly staggering but not charting a course for any bees to follow, either. The crowd parted to let her through: even if what followed had not happened, Adele had made it a memorable New Year's Eve for a lot of people.

Sam glanced down at his wrist watch as his hands kept moving in complete independence of his thoughts. Ten fifty-two and, according to the schedule, Danny should be in his room. Between ten-thirty and eleven-thirty Ocean was going to stand by for any last-minute phone calls about anything that might have gone wrong. Nothing would go wrong, of course, because all the rocks in this plan had been spotted weeks before and eliminated, but just in case.

Harmon finished the number he was playing, gave a chord progression to sign off the set, and got up from the bench. He smiled, nodded in response to the applause that made its way through the clamor and stepped off the dais, heading for the lobby phones. He was wedging his way through the crowd when he ran into Jimmy Foster.

The lieutenant looked unhappy. "You'll never guess," he murmured

to Harmon.

"I already saw Ekstrom," Sam murmured back. "She came up to the stand and—"

"No, no, this is my mother," Foster interrupted. "She's here with Duke Santos."

"Santos here?"

Jimmy nodded. "Of all the rotten luck. They were supposed to spend the holidays in Palm Springs but here they are. They didn't see me but they're bound to spot me, even in this crowd, and I'm supposed to be in Texas."

Harmon said slowly: "This is just dandy. Santos and Ekstrom both here. And maybe Bea, too. Adele just told me she'd fixed Danny's wagon for keeps; she phoned Bea and told her Danny was here instead of where he told her he was going to be, Texas, like you."

He was jostled by a passing drunk, recovered his balance. "D'you think Adele could have gotten Santos here, too, with what you told me she knows?"

Foster nodded, his brow clouded. "Could be," he acknowledged. "They used to be—old friends."

"And if Santos is onto this—"

A horn blared in Sam's ear and he ducked. A couple wove past, arms entwined, happy New Yearing one and all, an hour early but very exuberant about it.

"What shall we do?" Jimmy Foster asked.

"I'm on my way to call Danny now," Sam said. "Maybe he'll have an answer—I know for sure I don't."

"Everything's set, the tower and all. I don't see how—" He suddenly beamed and moved away from Harmon. "Well, Natalie!" he cried. "Imagine seeing you here! I thought you were in Palm Springs."

"And you're a naughty boy," Natalie Restes said. "You told me you couldn't spend the holidays with us because you had to go to Texas on business."

"Last-minute change of plans." Foster smiled. He looked at Duke Santos and extended a hand. The Duke wore a very conservative dinner jacket and prim tie; no eight-stud shirts with ruffles or piping, no tiny butterfly black tie for Mr. Santos.

"Do you forgive me for urging that drink on you, the last time we met?" Jimmy asked, exuding charm. "Bad judgment, I admit, but I had the best of intentions, really."

"Why, sure, I forgive you, Jimmy," Santos said. He looked in the direction Harmon had taken. "Who was that you were talkin' to?"

Foster gave a quick glance over his shoulder and shrugged. “Don’t know his name,” he lied. “Somebody who plays the piano here, I believe. Come on, you two: I’ll buy you a New Year’s Eve drink.”

Santos looked distressed, and Foster hastened to add: “A soft drink, of course. Lemonade, perhaps?”

“I can’t drink nothin’ citrus,” Santos explained gravely, “but maybe your mamma would like some more champagne. It’s a job gettin’ served, though. This place is really jumpin’ tonight.”

His dark, sad eyes swept the crowd, and he added reflectively: “There sure will be a lot of excitement when they ring in the New Year, won’t there?”

3

In his hotel room Danny Ocean hung up the telephone and cursed deeply, savagely. God damn all bitches but especially Adele Ekstrom. A guy would think a woman like that who could have practically any man she wanted would let a guy off the hook when he wanted off. Okay, so if she was burned up at the brush off he’d given her, let her take it out on him; why did she have to phone Bea?

He had been caught in a million lies with Bea before but this was going to be the worst. If she believed Ekstrom. Yeah, suppose she didn’t believe it? Suppose she said to herself Adele was just trying to make trouble because he’d sloughed her off and this stuff about him being in Vegas when he was supposed to be in Texas was just a lot of horse shit. Well, Bea wouldn’t think it that way because her mind was as clean as her tongue, but she could think it was a great big lie, couldn’t she? She could have faith that her husband, Danny Ocean who loved her, would never pull a trick like that, spending the holidays in Las Vegas with another broad after telling her that—

He gave a low groan. Why shouldn’t Bea think it was true? What had he, the great Danny Ocean, ever done to make her believe Adele was lying?

He sat there on the edge of the bed in his new dinner jacket and for a moment there was the impulse to put his head down in his hands and bawl like a damn kid. He was tired. He’d taken on too much, even for Danny Ocean, and here it was a few minutes away from the big deal, the one that was going to solve everything or land them all in the shit house, one or the other, and this slut he had only wanted to give a fast lay to and get loose had fouled everything up. She’d told Bea he was in Vegas, she’d let Bea know there were no thousand acres of oil land in Texas, that—

He raised his head and sneered at himself.

“So curl up and cry,” he said aloud. “Sam said Adele was plastered. She was just talkin’, maybe. Maybe she really didn’t call Bea at all. How’d she know where to call her in the first place? And even if she found out, Bea could tell she was stoned and she said, well, this is the way she tries to get back at my Danny because he gave her the brush.”

Sure, that’s what happened. In the first place, Adele didn’t call Bea. But if she did, Bea would never believe her, calling up plastered and talking wild, most likely. Bea would have faith. This once—*oh, dear God*—this once Bea would have faith in her husband’s word. No matter who said Danny Ocean was in Vegas, Bea would say no, he’s in Texas, closing a big oil deal.

He went to the bureau, pulled open a drawer, hauled out an unopened bottle of Scotch. Only drunks drank straight shots, alone, just for the bang the liquor gave them, but he had to have something now. His nerves, the nerves he used to say were something only rich broads could afford to have, were jumping and yelling. They had been itchy ever since he had gotten Tony Bergdorf out of the last casino, the wires gimmicked, and now they were really letting him know they were there. A good shot of Scotch would quiet them down. It wasn’t often a man could legitimately take a straight slug of liquor, all by himself, but this was the one time.

His fingernails tore at the heavy foil. Goddam stuff; you’d think they’d make these things easier to open instead of using this Goddam stuff that peeled and broke off in bits and wouldn’t come loose and—

He put down the bottle and braced himself against the bureau, his hands splayed, pressing hard against the glass plate. He looked at his traitorous fingers as they quivered in spite of all the pressure he exerted trying to keep them still. Then he raised his head and looked at himself in the mirror.

There he was, the great Danny Ocean. Not a hair out of place and the deep tan picked up in Phoenix and Salt Lake and, before that, in Acapulco and Sun Valley and Miami Beach and other such places, giving him the just-right complexion. Teeth white and even and all his own, and all the rest of him was right, too, nothing cheap, nothing clyde, the way he’d dreamed of having it when he was a punk, sitting in a junked Pierce-Arrow with Sam a thousand years ago.

And now, in a few minutes, there was going to be the money. The operation didn’t have a flaw in it. It would run off like clockwork. The guys were all in place even now, ready to move, and here he was, standing here shaking like a third-grader up in front of the principal.

“Get hold of yourself,” he told his reflection. “You got it made if you don’t flip now. So Bea believes Adele—so it’s too bad. This is for *you,* Ocean, nobody else. Get a million bucks in your fist and to hell with

what happens to all the others."

He raised his hands from the bureau top and smiled at his reflection when he saw they were steady again. Slowly, casually, he picked up the bottle of Scotch and replaced it in the drawer he had wrenched it from: other guys might need liquor to carry them but not Danny Ocean.

He straightened his black tie, bent his head to smooth his smooth hair. His wrist watch showed him it was eleven-six. Plenty of time. He could take off his jacket and lie down for a while if he wanted to, or call room service and get them to send up some sandwiches and—

There was a knock at his door and Ocean tensed, then relaxed. *It's all right, I tell you: you've got it made!* The halls were full of New Year's Eve drunks. Somebody had the wrong room. It was the maid asking if he wanted the bed turned down. It was—it was—

He crossed to the door and pulled it open and stood there and looked down at Bea.

She wore a brown traveling outfit and a brown felt hat that nobody but Bea could have made look so expensive. Her little shoes had rounded toes, not the stylish spikes that everybody else in Las Vegas had on that night, and her hands trembled slightly as she clutched her handbag to her.

"Baby!" Danny Ocean cried, but his exuberance was a shout in an empty warehouse, clattery, with echoes that rebounded off Bea's disillusionment and anger and shame for him, Danny Ocean.

"I was gonna call you," Ocean went on. He reached around Bea to close the door. "There was a change in plans. Instead of Texas, I'm meetin' the oil people here in Vegas. You know how those guys are: they don't think nothin' of callin' up at the last minute and sayin' that instead of Houston we'll meet in Las Vegas. They got their own planes and never mind how inconvenient it is for everybody else, it's the way they want it that's the way it has to be."

He seized her shoulders and drew her to him. She did not turn her head. She let him kiss her and he might as well have been kissing stone.

He dropped his hands and stepped back, putting on the hurt look. "What's the matter, Bea?" he asked. "I told you I wouldn't be able to get together with you tonight. Remember I said—"

"That woman phoned me," Bea said woodenly, "She told me you were here in Las Vegas, at this hotel, with another girl."

"Listen, Bea, honey, I told you it was nothin' between Adele Ekstrom and me, didn't I? She's a bitch, a troublemaker. So I told her I didn't want to have anything more to do with her so she got back at

me this way, tellin' you I'm in Vegas with a babe when—"

"Oh, Danny," Bea broke in. Her voice wailed softly. "What's going to happen, Danny?"

She dragged off her hat and walked to the bed, sat down and then lay back, looking up at the ceiling. The hand holding the hat let it drop to the floor.

"I thought that this time—" Bea began, and choked. The tears flowed from the corners of her eyes, down her temples, making them glisten.

As Danny moved toward her he looked down at his watch. *Jesus, eleven-eighteen.*

"All I'm askin' you to do is this one thing," he told her. "I just want you to hang on for another—another coupla days. Never mind what Adele Ekstrom said. Never mind what anybody else said. Never mind about the Texas bit. Just hang on with me for a coupla days, Bea."

"No," she told the ceiling. "No, I'm through. When that woman called I told myself I'd be as low as she is if I checked up. I told myself I'd stay where I was in my little apartment and eat my frozen dinner and watch my TV and wait for you to knock on the door. And then—and then I couldn't. I had to come here and humiliate myself. I had to find out that what she said was true."

"But it ain't true!" Ocean cried fiercely. "I haven't got any broad here. Look, it's a single. Look in the closet. Look in the bureau drawers. Honest, Bea!"

"Honest, Bea," she mimicked in a dead voice.

Danny cast himself on the bed beside his wife. He gathered her alien body into his arms and his words were muffled against her neck. "Stick with me, Bea," he begged. "Give me a break."

She did not answer, and he hurried on. "I don't mean you haven't given me all the breaks, but this once, this one last time—"

"One last time," Bea murmured.

"No, I mean it. There's a lotta things you don't understand. I can't explain now but I'll tell you someday."

He looked at his wrist watch. *Eleven twenty-six—you gotta hurry.* He reached over and gathered his wife's body in his clasp and pulled her closer to him. "Bea," he mumbled against her neck. "Bea, honey."

"No, Danny," she said.

"Bea." The traveling outfit was made of tweed, not meant for a bed, but it unbuttoned and it had zippers that slid open and let Danny Ocean's hands touch soft silk and skin. Bea lay stonily as he made his approaches, but then—too late, poor Bea!—she tried to struggle up from the bed.

"No!" she cried weakly. "It's wrong! It's vile!"

But by that time she was trapped, caught by the something that had claimed stronger women than Bea, who loved him.

"Bea!"

She held him down to her, looking up at the ceiling, and through the waves of rapture that made her shudder she knew that this was the last time. She might have other men, even love other men, but this was the last time that she would have Danny Ocean with her and in her and around her and part of her. It was wrong, it was vile, it was heaven.

She cried softly, and her limbs strained and then there was a soft, sighing peace. She settled back on the rumpled bed and when she found the courage to open her eyes, Danny was at the bureau, brushing his hair.

He saw her watching him in the mirror, and he said: "I gotta leave you for a little while. I gotta meet these Texas guys. The ones I told you about."

She made one last try, although she must have known it was useless. "Don't go, Danny," she said. "Stay here with me. I don't want the million dollars. All I want is for you to stay here with me. Just stay with me, Danny, please."

He turned, straightening his tie. "I sure wish I could, but there's this deal, baby. The big one."

"A bigger deal than the two of us being together?" she asked.

He gave an uncertain laugh. "There's a time for everything, as the fella said. I'll be back before you know it, baby. Just call room service if you want anything. Get some food and some champagne up here and when I get back we'll have a New Year's party, after all, the two of us. Sure, that's what we'll do."

"Stay here, Danny." Bea's voice was very low. "Don't leave me."

He walked over to her and cupped her chin in his hand, smiled down at her. "It'll only be a few minutes. Honest, kid, this is business. It's no dame. Honest, it's the Texas guys."

He checked his wrist watch as he reached for the doorknob. Eleven forty-seven and he was three minutes off the pace. But one thing: he had Bea fixed. He didn't have to worry about her for the next couple of hours, at least.

"Good-by, Danny," Bea said from the bed.

He turned at her tone. "Hey, I ain't exactly goin' to Europe," he protested. "I'll be right back. Grab a nap or somethin'."

The door closed behind him. Bea looked down at herself, absently pulled the half slip down over her thighs. So this was the end of it.

When she had been a homely little girl with braids, her freckles and her voice and her walk and everything else about her all wrong, hopeless, she had dreamed of being loved by the prince. He wouldn't be a sissy prince like the one in Cinderella but a Clark Gable kind of prince who would be harshly gentle and say nice things, like she was the prettiest girl on Prospect Street.

Well, she had found her prince and he had let her love him and she supposed she ought to be grateful for that. And now he was gone. He had left her with a lie, and that was too bad. It would be hard in the years to come to remember that the prince had walked out of her life with a lie on his lips. If he'd only looked back at the last moment—even if he had kept on walking after that—and said: *I lied about everything else but not about loving you.*

"Hearts and Flowers, please, Perfesser," Bea said, and dragged herself up off the bed and picked up her scattered clothes. She dressed and went to the bathroom to wash her face, forever rid herself of the trace of tears for Danny Ocean. She was reaching for a towel on the rack beside the hand basin when the lights went out.

"Happy New Year, Mrs. Danny Ocean," she told herself in the blackness. "Happy, Happy New Year."

4

The main power transmission tower on the outskirts of Las Vegas blew up with no great flare and boom. Pete Rheimer was no Fourth-of-July man; if anybody wanted a set piece spelling out God Bless America, with spark-dripping pictures of Washington and Lincoln at either end, he would do better to hire a pyrotechnic specialist. Pete's talent was in using the least amount of explosive possible to complete the demolition project with no fuss.

Earlier that day, when the purple-and-ocher dusk was softening the Nevada landscape, Pete had slipped over the fence surrounding the towers and had attached four flat packages at various points around the base of the main structure. These packages contained timing devices, all meticulously synchronized to set off the charges at one minute and thirty-eight seconds past midnight.

The tower was of the best structural steel, stoutly riveted, but Pete knew his work well. When the four bombs went off, they crumpled the big structure as fast and as completely as though a missile with an atomic warhead had scored a direct hit. Ranchers living not far from the towers felt a jar but there was no shattering concussion, no sky-lighting flash.

"There go the gaw-durned lights again," was the common reaction in the part of Clark County contiguous to Las Vegas. "They're shore

startin' the New Year right, the power comp'ny."

In Las Vegas no special significance was placed immediately on the blackout. The radio, the TV, had tolled off the countdown to midnight and there had been the usual blast of horn blowing, yells, pistol shots, at the magic moment while every band in every place that had a band played "Auld Lang Syne." People embraced each other and kisses were exchanged, and silently, beneath their own shrieks of jubilation, men and women told themselves that *this* was going to be the year. Yes, sir, this was going to be the year when everybody was going to really *accomplish* something, not let three hundred and sixty-five days go down the drain like the year before and the year before that, without half the things that had been planned ever realized.

The lights were dimmed in all the overcrowded saloons except for an occasional spotlight on a high-priced entertainer who led the singing or on a cage of white doves that were released (and refused to fly, squatting there stupidly) in one place at midnight, and, in another casino, on a tableau that starred a scared child, nude except for a sash that bore the New Year's numerals. When these few spotlights and the dimmed house lights blacked out it was, at first, just part of the show. Nobody got excited. Nobody got alarmed.

Well, let that be amended to say that the security cops in the major casinos, while they were not exactly excited or alarmed, cursed the power failure to a man. A blackout at any time was bad enough (some dame screaming that she'd lost a couple of hundred bucks when she came in with a dollar thirty to play the nickel slots, and always the chance of some drunk making a fast grab at somebody else's wife, with the resultant unpleasantness when the auxiliary power kicked on), but on New Year's Eve a power breakdown even for twenty seconds was dangerous. Every place was jammed, of course, there was a lot of high-priced jewelry walking around on the flesh, and while the known pickpockets, queer-moneypassers, and troublemakers were usually screened out of a casino, there was no telling who might have gotten in on New Year's Eve.

It was a good thing, the guards told themselves, that the auxiliary power plants would put the lights back on as soon as they did; otherwise there was always the chance of panic. Some of these men, civilian cops in other days, had had brushes with panic and they never wanted to meet up with it again. Crowded places with the lights gone out always held a panic potential—some Goddam fool might think he smelled smoke—so as the seconds passed and the casino security cops waited for the auxiliary power plants to make everything right again, the guards shone their flashlights and moved through the crowds, chanting: "Light will be on in just a second, folks. Happy New Year."

The bands in all the casinos kept on with “Auld Lang Syne,” even after the people got tired of singing it over and over. In his lounge Sam Harmon cried: “How about joining me in ‘I Want a Girl Just Like the Girl That Married Dear Old Dad’?” Come flood, war or pestilence, there never was a crowd that could resist joining in on that one, or in “When You Wore a Tulip” and the other old corny favorites that Harmon followed up with.

Several things happened in the time that Las Vegas was blacked out. In a corner of one of the larger casinos a girl was deflowered by a man she had just met, a fellow named Johnson or Jackson or something like that, anyway a real gentleman, very slick. At the gaming tables chips worth an aggregate of several hundreds of dollars vanished from in front of their temporary owners. A waiter did something he had been waiting years to do and had all but given up hope of ever doing: over the fat, bedizened silent movie queen who made life hell for all servants and never tipped he emptied a large tureen of Vichyssoise and silently stole away. The demure, devoted wife of a national business figure moved her hand only a foot or so to astonish and delight her husband’s male secretary who, until that moment, had treated her with a reverent awe usually reserved for the Virgin Mary.

And out of the five cashiers’ cages in five casinos Danny Ocean’s “Eleven” took ten million, six hundred and forty-seven thousand dollars.

It worked, as Spyros Acebos had hoped it would, like clockwork, seventeen jewels. When the lights went out the “porters” and floaters of Ocean’s gang donned their special glasses, got out their infrared flashlights, and followed the guideposts they had so carefully sprayed here and there during the preceding week. It was, as Spyros had said, like reading the signs on the Freeway.

All the assigned men were at the cage doors when the twenty seconds elapsed between the main power line shorting out and the auxiliary power plants taking over. When the cage locks clicked, Danny’s men went in with their infrared flashlights that nobody saw, certainly not the cashiers at their windows, their backs to the safes, and took the money.

If later it seemed incredible that only one of the five cashiers even knew he was being robbed, it must be remembered that at the time there was considerable legitimate confusion outside the cages. “Auld Lang Syne” was still being pumped out, one more time, the midnight kissing had not yet finished, the security cops were busy assuring everybody that the lights would be on again any second, don’t anybody get alarmed, Happy New Year. The horns were braying, a

million little mallets were playing a tattoo on a million little tin noise-makers: there was general pandemonium, to provide for which the casino owners themselves had spared no expense.

The cashiers were hardly to be blamed for not being more vigilant than they were. Power failures were not too uncommon and, to their way of thinking, if they gave it any thought at all, the money in their keeping was never safer than when the power was off: even the button that had to be pressed to admit authorized persons was dead. With the auxiliary power would come the lights and a return to the routine of selling chips and cashing in chips, and until the reserve power came on, take a break, relax; nothing could possibly happen.

The one cashier who did know he was being robbed had, for some reason, left the window where he usually sat, after slamming shut the wicket to guard against any long arm reaching in, and walked back toward the safe. He collided with a body, Lou Jackson's.

There was shocked immobility and then the cashier asked: "Ed? That you, Ed?"

"Wrong party, I'm afeerd," Lou said quietly, and brought his flashlight down on the cashier's skull, not too hard but hard enough to send the man down with a tired sigh.

So the cashiers' safes were scooped clean, the five teams left and followed the infrared directions through the crowded rooms and out back, through the service quarters, to the one deserted spot in each casino, the area where sat the rows of trash cans, waiting for the ministrations of the Southern Nevada Disposal Service.

Into the garbage cans went all those millions of dollars, along with the infrared flashlights and glasses. Then the members of Danny Ocean's gang returned to their respective casinos to mingle with the crowds that, by now, were beginning to demand lights, c'mon, somebody put a quarter in the meter.

By this time the casino owners knew they had been hit. When their auxiliary power systems failed to work they summoned their house electricians and as each power switchboard was checked, there was the evidence of Tony Bergdorf's artistry. There was a frantic rush to the cashiers' cages and flashlights revealed to astonished cashiers that they had been wiped out. And of course there was the one unconscious cashier on the floor of his cage, just beginning to twitch his way awake again.

Then all hell broke loose. Frantic phone calls from five of Las Vegas' biggest casinos hit the sheriff's office within two minutes. Squad cars careened through town, sirens wading to revive the New Year's Eve caterwauling that had begun to recede from *fortissimo* to *diminuendo*. To close off the exits of five big casinos simultaneously took more men

than the sheriff had on hand, so supernumeraries and even Civil Defense police were called out on the job. The exits were finally sealed but the sheriff had to admit that in the time it took the thieves could have (he actually said it) made their getaway.

"But you don't carry off that many bundles of dough in a brief case," one of the casino managers argued. "They had to have a truck."

"First thing we thought of," the sheriff said. "We got every delivery truck that was on the streets at that time and went over it with (inescapably) a fine-tooth comb. There were only a couple of trucks moving—who'd be making deliveries at midnight on New Year's Eve, for God's sake?—and they're clean."

"Well, a plane, then," another manager cried. "They got the dough to the airfield and flew it out of Vegas."

"Not out of the regular airport or any of the little private fields," the sheriff retorted. "Not a plane has landed or taken off since five minutes after eleven. Soon as we got the report we closed off the airports, along with the roads and the railroad and bus stations. Nobody carrying over ten million bucks has left Las Vegas since we got the alarm."

"But before that," one of the robbed ones fretted. "They must have had at least fifteen minutes to work with before we found out something was wrong. You can do a lot in fifteen minutes."

The sheriff leaned forward, elbows on knees, the star on his chest glinting in the overhead light. "Fifteen minutes is nothing when you're trying to handle ten million dollars," he said reassuringly. "Do you realize the bulk of that much dough? Where are you going to put it, in the trunk of your Chevy sedan, maybe, and ride out of town with it? Or hide it under the mattress? Ten million dollars in bills is a big piece, mister. You don't hide it in your hip pocket. And that's where we got 'em."

"You think so?" one of the casino men asked hopefully.

"I know so," the sheriff said. "This heist had everything down pat except getting the money out. They'll lay low for a couple of days, the gang that did this, and then they'll try to sort of dribble it out. Say there were twenty men in this operation; that means they'll each have to carry—lessee—something like half a million dollars on them when they make their move. And in bills, remember, not a certified check. And everybody who goes down Route Ninety-one is going to have their car checked from now to next Christmas till we get a lead. Nobody's going out of the airport without a search—let 'em squawk about how illegal it may be; I don't care. Same way with the baggage that people carry into the railroad station. I suppose it's against the Bill of Rights or something but this is ten million bucks and a

reflection on my department, so let anybody who wants to complain."

He tilted his sombrero back on his head. "We know there are at least five guys in this city who are sitting on ten million dollars. I know crooks, and they won't sit still long. They'll get restless. They'll want to move out of here with their grab and when they do—Yes, Oley?"

A deputy sheriff placed a slip of paper in front of the sheriff and said, apologetically: "I know you're busy, Sheriff, but you told me to give you these things as soon as they came in. Sudden death. Guy dropped dead on the sidewalk just outside the Sahara."

The sheriff pushed the report aside. "I've got ten million dollars to find and you give me a routine heart case." He caught himself and moved his hand in an apologetic gesture. "Okay, Oley, I know I told you to give me sudden deaths, no matter what. Who was the guy, anybody big?"

"Fella named Bergdorf," the deputy said. "Nobody much, looks like. He was carryin' forty-three bucks in his wallet. Wife's address in San Francisco. He was a veteran—Eighty-second Airborne. An old electrical union card."

"Get in touch with the widow," the sheriff said wearily, and turned back to the important business at hand.

5

At the exact moment the deputy was reciting the list of Tony Bergdorf's last effects Josh Howard was bringing his truck to a stop at the wigwagged signals made by the flashlight held by a cop. He thrust his head out of the window and asked: "Okay to go through, Officer?"

The cop did not reply. He crouched to play his flashlight along the underpinning of the hopper truck, then returned to the cab.

"What business you got in this place?" he asked officially.

"Business?" Josh asked, and laughed. "Man, I'm drivin' a garbage truck, ain't that enough answer? What's this all about, anyway?"

"Never mind. Let's see your driver's license."

Josh proffered the celluloid envelope that contained the slip giving essential information concerning his age, color, and sex.

"What's all the road blocks for?" the Negro asked. "Somebody hold up a bank or somethin'?"

"You can read about it in the papers," the policeman said. He walked around the front of the truck, opened the right-hand door, and climbed in. "I gotta go with you and watch you while you pick up the garbage," he said. He relaxed on the seat and sighed. "Goddam silliest orders I ever heard of but that's what the man says."

“Suits me,” Josh said delightedly. “I don’t get much company on these early-mornin’ runs, especially on New Year’s Eve.”

He put the truck in gear and went up the drive to the loading platforms with their rows of trash cans. He backed the hopper truck up to the platform and shut off the engine.

“I don’t s’pose you’d like to learn the disposal business, would you?” he asked the man beside him. “Sort of help me, I mean?”

“Look,” the cop said wearily, “let’s not make jokes. Let’s just get the garbage in the truck and get out, huh?”

“Yazzuh, boss,” Josh Howard said. He went up onto the platform as he had every morning at this time for the past month and wrestled the big cans toward the mouth of the hopper. He heaved the first can of refuse into the yawning mouth of the container, replaced the can on the platform upside down, its lid against its side, went on to the next one. He came to the can that held the money, the one marked with the daub of paint on the underside of its cover, and carried it to the truck. Although he knew he shouldn’t, he had to peer down inside: he hadn’t looked in any of the others and this was the last one.

There was the trash bag, as big as a sack of potatoes, and there, half-buried by the orange peels and steak scraps and other garbage, was the flashlight. He couldn’t see the infrared glasses but they must be down in there somewhere.

He dumped the two million dollars into the maw of the garbage truck and went back for the next can. A little later he slapped down the lid of the hopper and climbed back into the cab of the truck.

“What’s this all about?” he asked again. “I won’t tell anybody.”

“I know damn well you won’t because I ain’t tellin’ you,” the cop grunted. “Just get this heap movin’ and drop me off where you picked me up. You can read all about it in the newspapers.”

Josh Howard drove the officer out to the end of the driveway and let him off. Then he took his big white truck through the city of Las Vegas that still was celebrating the advent of the new year, although with signs of running out of gas by now, and went out the road toward the dump. There was a road block with flashing red lights but the police there waved him on through after a perfunctory inspection. It was the garbage truck that came through here every night at this time: the squad cars were used to passing him; they could almost set their watches by him.

Josh drove out to the dump, tilted the hopper, and let the refuse spill out. A fresh load of garbage spread out to cascade down into a half-choked ravine. When the truck was empty, Josh scrambled down the slope, flashlight in hand, and headed for a large boulder that projected from the side of the ravine just above the level of the trash.

The Negro tugged at the rock and it yielded easily, moved out of its socket to reveal a sizable cave behind it. This was the hiding place that Josh and Vince Massler had dug in their spare time, a cave big enough to hold all the bags of money that Josh now separated from the other waste and tossed inside.

He worked fast. It required only a few minutes to pack the moneybags, flashlights, and glasses in the cave. Then Josh replaced the rock, scrambled up the side of the ravine again, and drove off in his white truck, whistling a happy tune.

CHAPTER SIX…

1

It was nearly noon of New Year's Day and Danny Ocean was in his hotel room when the telephone rang.

Bea? Was she calling from L.A. or even somewhere in town to tell him that she had found out she could never leave him, that it was all a mistake about her walking out and letting him come back to an empty room, the bed's coverlet still rumpled from their love-making, but no Bea?

He kept the eagerness out of his voice. "Yeah?"

It was Vince Massler. "Danny, you hear about Tony?"

Ocean's immediate reaction was black anger. Goddam it, the fellas had their orders not to contact each other under any circumstances. Who could tell who was tapped in on the hotel phones?

"Who is this?" he asked. "You sure you got the right party?"

"Danny, old Tony dropped over dead just a few minutes after—Well, you know."

Oh, great. Oh, fine. Why didn't this dumb sonofabitch just come right out and say it: Bergdorf crapped out right after the casino heists?

"I'm sorry," Danny said lightly and with a laugh just under his voice, "but I'm not getting you. You still celebratin', perhaps?"

There was a brief silence at the other end of the line and then Vince said: "I guess I got the wrong party. Sorry." Then he hung up.

Danny clashed the phone down, stood up, and began pacing the room. Tony Bergdorf dead. Well, it was too bad, but why couldn't he have picked a better time to fall over if he had to go like that? Why couldn't he have waited a couple of days or even a couple of hours? But no, he had to drop dead right when the cops were looking for things to grab hold of. Any other time it would be just a guy with a bad heart or something like that falling over; it must happen every day in Vegas, but with the law running around in circles trying like crazy to lay hold of something, they'd make a big deal of it. And what would they find?

He poured himself a straight slug of Scotch (yes, he had finally opened the bottle in the bureau drawer; he had had to or go nuts) and gulped it down. The liquor's warmth spread through him, quieting the jumps.

What would they find on Tony? Nothing. The glasses and the flashlights were stashed with the money, at the cave, and for all the cops would ever find out, Tony Bergdorf was just another tourist who made too big a night of it on New Year's Eve. Why the sweat?

He poured himself another drink and walked to the window, sipping it. Once he had read or heard that the waiting was the toughest part of any operation like this. Everybody who did a job had the crazy urge to break away from where it happened, get out of town. That wouldn't happen with this gang, not "Ocean's Eleven," as that dopey Mushy had named them. They had figured everything out. For the next four days they were all going to do just what they had been doing for a week before the heist. Sam was going to keep on playing the piano. Mushy and Vince and the others were going to keep on picking up cigarette butts and bringing cracked ice to the bars and mopping the floors. By that time the real hot heat would be off. The law would have figured by then that the dough had left town.

Oh, right now the cops were probably swearing they'd keep the road blocks and the shakedowns going until the Fourth of July if they had to, but they wouldn't. No matter how red hot they were now, they'd cool off in time. There would be new cases, nothing this big but enough to put the cops to work trying to catch somebody else, crack some other crime. Then the gang could drift out of town, one by one, and in a month, maybe less than that, they could come back and open that cave.

The dough was safe enough. Even if they burned off the dump, as they did about every three months, the cave was deep enough to keep the money safe. When the time came, when they figured the law was convinced the money was long gone from Vegas, then they could move it out. Yeah, they had that all planned, too.

Of course a couple of things had gone wrong but a big operation like this figured to have something go a little different than the plans had set them out. The first thing, the big thing that Spyros Acebos and the others except Jimmy Foster and maybe Sam didn't know about, was his opening his yap to Adele that time. Danny still couldn't remember just what it was he had told her, but it couldn't have been half as dangerous as he sometimes thought when he got the whimwhams. Adele had been drinking as much as he had at the time and chances were she didn't remember any of it, or trust her own memory if she did. If Adele really had known anything she would have shot off her mouth to Bea about it and while Bea had known that the Texas thing was a phony, she hadn't suspected anything about the real bit.

So the important thing now was to sit tight. Poor old Tony dropping

over was bad but not fatal. The cops couldn't have found anything on him: they were sure to have pegged him as just another stiff that the holidays were too much for. Sure, that's the way it was. That's the way it had to be.

He hoped Vince and the others wouldn't do anything crazy, like going down to see Tony at the morgue or wherever they'd put him. No, even Vince wouldn't be sucker enough to do anything like that. Let the cops get in touch with Tony's widow if he was carrying that much identification on him when he went over, and let her bury him. Later, when they got the dough out of the cave and split it up, they'd arrange it so that Bergdorf's kid would get something. Roger Corneal had said that Tony came in only because of the kid so they'd level with Bergdorf even if he was dead; the boy would get his split okay.

The main thing to do was to play it cool, not do a lot of worrying about things that weren't going to happen. It was going to be okay. It was too bad about Tony, but from what Rog Corneal had let drop, old Tony knew it was coming. He must have passed out happy, knowing he'd done his part in the job and so his kid was going to get the money.

There was a rap on the hotel room door and Sam Harmon called softly: "Danny?"

Ocean scowled. It wasn't good for them to talk over the phone to each other, much less visit around like this. But everybody who knew him knew Sam Harmon was his friend; there was nothing suspicious about Sam dropping in on him before he went to work at his lounge. Maybe it was even better this way: if anybody had an eye on them they might think it was funny that they stayed away from each other all of a sudden.

Danny snapped the night latch and opened the door. Sam drifted in, the same old Sam, maybe a little down in the mouth, but that was on account of Tony Bergdorf. The pianist walked over to the chair beside the window and sat down, threw a leg over the chair arm.

"I suppose you heard?" he asked Ocean.

"Tough." Danny nodded. "But I guess you knew Tony was pretty sick. He was just hangin' on till he could do this job for the kid's future."

Harmon nodded somberly. "There's something else, Danny," he said gently. "Duke Santos."

Ocean's eyes narrowed. "What about Duke Santos?"

Harmon took the time to light a cigarette, snapped shut his lighter and stowed it in his jacket pocket. "I don't know, exactly," he admitted, "but Santos is onto something. Or maybe he's trying to cut himself in without really knowing anything, just faking it. Anyway, I

was in the lobby of my place and Duke Santos came in with three guys, all big men in the casinos we hit. They went into the manager's office and a few minutes later another casino owner showed up. With the owner of my place, that made all five of them in there with Santos. There must have been quite a conference."

Ocean felt the fear stir within him, fought it back. "What can Santos know?" he asked. "He's just—he's just tryin' to deal himself in on this somehow."

"How?" Harmon asked. "What's his angle?"

"How the hell do I know?" Ocean asked savagely. He sat down on the edge of the bed and ran a hand over his hair. "I've heard how these guys operate sometimes and maybe it's this: Santos could be bracin' the casino owners with the proposition that his organization can find the guys that pulled the job and get the dough back, for a percentage. It's been done before. Not as big jobs as this but the same idea: you give me a split and I'll put my organization to work findin' out who pulled this on you."

Sam considered the explanation and nodded slowly. "Could be," he acknowledged. "I guess you know more about these things than I do."

Danny looked across the room at the man who had been his best friend for so many years. "You don't believe me, huh?" he asked. "You're thinkin' about the other."

Harmon regarded the man on the bed with mild wonderment. "What other?"

"Either you think Adele squawked to Santos about what I'm s'posed to have spilled to her, or Jimmy Foster—"

He never finished the sentence. There was another rap at the door. Ocean looked inquiringly at Sam Harmon and the pianist hunched his shoulders in a shrug. Danny sat where he was for a long moment and then, as the rap sounded again, got up and crossed the room to the door.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"This is Duke Santos, Mr. Ocean," said a voice from the other side of the panel. "I got some business I'd like to discuss with you."

2

For a second Danny braced himself against the door as though to prevent Duke Santos from pushing his way into the room. Then he relaxed, laughing at himself. Nerves like an old woman. Him, Danny Ocean.

Duke Santos didn't know anything. Even if he did think he knew something he couldn't prove it. Let him in. Find out what he thought

he had. Duke Santos was a syndicate boss, a businessman, no torpedo. He might be dangerous, sure, but he wasn't going to do anything to anybody until he found out where that dough was.

Danny opened the door, the smile on his face the usual Danny Ocean trademark, jaunty, self-possessed, supremely confident. Duke Santos stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. He looked across at Harmon and then returned his dark eyes to Ocean. "Hello, Danny," he said softly.

"You want somethin'?" Ocean said.

Santos' eyes went to Sam Harmon again. "I don't think I know your friend even though I saw him with Jimmy Foster last night, didn't I? Just before the—ah—excitement?"

"Could be," Danny said easily. "He gets around. And speakin' of not knowin' people, you don't know me, either."

Santos smiled with a display of those perfect teeth. "Sure I do. I know lots of your buddies, too, Danny. Tony Bergdorf, Jimmy Foster, to name a couple."

"Foster and I are old friends," Ocean admitted. "I don't dig the other guy."

"Tony Bergdorf," Santos repeated. "He died early today, in case you don't know. I've been askin' around and the cops got hold of his widow in San Francisco. She's flying up here to claim the body now." He shook his head sadly. "Poor old Tony is going home in a pine box."

"Look," Ocean said, "I don't know what you're talkin' about but we're kind of busy."

"Then I won't take up much of your time," Santos said. "I just wanted to tell you that it was a beautiful job you boys pulled. A real work of art."

Danny Ocean put his hands on his hips and thrust out his lower lip. "What are you, a cop?" he asked.

Duke Santos leaned back his head to laugh. "Me? Duke Santos a cop? No, Mr. Ocean. I only wish I was in on this operation with you from the beginning, is all. How I envy your youth."

"You're not gonna get any younger wastin' your time here," Danny rapped out. "What do you want, anyway?"

"I want half," said Duke Santos simply.

"Half of what?"

Santos shrugged. "You guys tell me. You got the money."

"You're not comin' through at all," Ocean snorted. "You're talkin' into a dead phone."

"Then they got a live one at the sheriff's office." Santos smiled.

Sam Harmon stirred in his chair and Santos threw him a quick, hard look. The pianist had merely recrossed his legs, and the racketeer looked back at Danny Ocean.

"So you *are* a cop," Ocean sneered.

A headshake. "No, I'm a businessman," Santos explained. "A little while ago I made a deal with the casino owners to get their money back. But they only wanted to give me ten per cent of what I recovered for them. Then I got a brilliant thought, if I do say so myself. And so I came right to you and you're going to give me fifty per cent, Mr. Ocean. Fifty per cent of the whole amount."

"You're playing both ends from the middle, eh?"

"Sure," Santos said cheerfully. "I can't lose."

Ocean's voice matched the hard glint in his eyes. "You already lost, clyde," he said. "The dough has left town. It's long gone."

A regretful headshake, as though Santos hated to dispute the other man's word. "If you're here, the dough's here, Ocean. None of you Eighty-second Airborne guys have made a move out of Vegas so it stands to reason the money's still in town, don't it?"

"What do you mean, the Eighty-second Airborne guys?" Ocean asked desperately. "What's that got to do with it?"

"Everything." Santos beamed. "That was what gave me my brilliant idea. Some time back Adele Ekstrom told me you were mixing up in something big, but you know Adele. You should. I put it down to some big talk from a little man trying to impress a lady. But then, after I talked to the casino operators awhile back, I bought a newspaper and right there it was as big as life that Tony Bergdorf is a veteran, a guy with medals, yet, from the Eighty-second Airborne. It starts me thinking, Mr. Ocean."

Danny started to say something, held himself in check.

"Being acquainted with Jimmy Foster's mamma real well," Santos went on after a pause, "I of course know that Jimmy is a veteran of the Eighty-second Airborne. His mamma has often spoken of you, Mr. Ocean, as Jimmy's best friend, *also* a veteran of that fine organization."

He half turned to nod toward Sam Harmon. "I said I didn't know your friend but I know his name, actually. I made it my business to find out. Sam Harmon, he is, *another* guy from the Eighty-second. All these guys from the same outfit, a reunion in Las Vegas. So I put two and two together and it come up ten million dollars, plus. You want to know how I figured, Danny?"

"You're doin' the talkin'," Ocean said between his teeth.

"You paratroopers or airborne infantry or whatever you were called

were a pretty tough bunch of soldiers in the war," Santos explained. "You had nerve like nobody else. This operation last night called for plenty of nerve. It also called for teamwork like you guys had to have in the war."

He beamed more brightly. "It was really simple deductions, Mr. Ocean. It don't require a very smart guy to figure out you're the head of this thing—you were the guy that made things go in your company or platoon or whatever it was, according to Mrs. Restes, Jimmy's mamma. It's either you or Jimmy who ran that show last night, and for private personal reasons I pick you as the guy that's going to take the fall if you don't give me half the money."

Danny Ocean's face twitched in his torment and his voice was blurted. "Look, Santos, we couldn't make a deal with you even if we wanted to. There are other guys involved."

"So talk to them," Duke Santos said pleasantly. "Explain the situation to them. Spell it out for them that half of ten million clams—plus—is better than hundred per cent of nothing, which is what you'll wind up with if I call the sheriff."

"But it'll take time!"

Santos turned toward the door. "You'll find I'm an easy man to get along with. Besides, I know you won't try anything cute because I have an organization that wouldn't like it if you did." He glanced at the watch on his wrist. "So I'll give you till one o'clock tomorrow. I'll meet you here. And, Mr. Ocean, you'd better be here, too."

He started out of the room and Danny called after him. "One more thing, Santos—what about Foster?"

Another shrug of the conservatively tailored shoulders. "I told his mamma to get him out of town—out of the country would be better yet, I said. After all, I'm gonna marry Mrs. Restes and it's only right I should give my future son-in-law a break, don't you think?"

When he was gone, Danny whirled toward Sam Harmon, his face distorted by his fury. "He sold us out!" he cried. "Jimmy double-crossed us. Santos didn't figure anything out—Foster told him. Maybe Jimmy had it set right along to sell out to Santos like this. Maybe—"

"Danny, Danny." Harmon's tone was pitying. "You don't believe that."

"I don't? I gotta have it tattooed on my ass, maybe?" He peered at Harmon. "What's with you—are you in on it, too? You always acted like you hated Foster's guts and now that he shows what he is you all of a sudden stand up for the slob." He sneered. "The wonderful Sam Harmon, always gotta be different, always gotta be takin' up for the

opposition."

"And you've always got to be jumping to conclusions," Harmon said quietly.

"Yeah? What'll the other boys be jumpin' at when they find out what's happened? My throat, that's what."

Sam leaned over to grind out his cigarette carefully in a tray on the bureau. "One question, Danny-boy," he said. "Does Jimmy know where Josh hid the money?"

"You know he does!"

"Then why does Santos come to us with this fifty per cent thing? Why didn't Foster just tell Santos where the dough was and the two of them could split it down the middle? Why all this business of Santos having to come see us and make threats? He wouldn't need to move in any direction except out to that cave if Jimmy Foster had turned rat."

Ocean's face lost some of its bitterness. He nodded grudgingly. "Maybe you're right," he admitted. "But just the same, Jimmy's run out on us. Santos gave him a break, didn't you hear him say, and by now Foster's prob'ly headin' outta Vegas so fast—"

A rap on the door interrupted him. Sam Harmon gave a faint joyless smile. "I have the strange feeling that that's your friend now, Danny," he said.

It was Jimmy Foster. He hurried into the room when Ocean yanked open the door. "My mother just told me about Santos asking questions," he said. "I think Santos knows. He—he told Natalie to get me out of town before he blows the lid off everything." He looked from Danny to Harmon. "Do I have to tell you men that I didn't have anything to do with him finding out?" he asked slowly.

"No, of course not," Sam Harmon said. "He was just here. He told us how he doped it out. There never was a doubt in our minds about where you stood, Lieutenant. Was there, Danny?"

Ocean walked to the bureau where the fifth of Scotch sat. He poured himself another drink with no invitation to the other two. Foster glanced at Harmon, his eyebrows up, and Sam shook his head: no, he didn't know why this change in Danny Ocean. They waited until Ocean had gulped his straight shot and then Sam asked again:

"Was there, Danny?"

"Naw, accourse not," Ocean said, without turning. He poured another drink and tossed it off, shuddered, and then brought himself around to face Jimmy Foster.

"Well, if you wanta know, yeah, I guess I blew my stack for a while, Jimmy," he muttered. "I thought maybe you'd crossed us but old Sambo straightened me out quick. I'm sorry. I—I gotta lot on my

mind. Maybe I'm crackin' up."

"No, you're not," Foster said firmly. "Hell, who could blame you for being upset with everything that's happened? Tony Bergdorf and now Santos."

He hesitated and then raised his chin a fraction. "You're not going to like this, Danny," he went on, "but I dropped in at the mortuary to see Tony. A couple of the other boys were there—Roger Corneal, Vince Massler."

"Oh, swell," Ocean grunted. "Maybe we oughta get a banner painted, the Eighty-second Airborne Heisting and Burial Society."

"I felt I owed it to him," Jimmy said. "The others felt the same way. He was a good man, Danny."

"Sure, sure." Ocean nodded. "We were all good men. But right now we got our nuts in a vise and I gotta figure out some way to get 'em outta there."

He started to reach for the bottle again, restrained himself just before his hand grasped the fifth. He brushed at his hair, scowling.

"Tony's widow arrived while I was there," Jimmy said. "She was all broken up."

Danny snorted. "I bet she was. Wasn't she the broad that got a court order keepin' Tony from seein' his kid after he took that one fall?"

"Well, she seemed genuine enough. Maybe she's sorry for what she did," Foster said. "She's taking the body back to San Francisco tomorrow."

Danny Ocean looked up suddenly. "She's takin' the body back to Frisco? In a pine box?"

Foster looked puzzled. "Why, I suppose so," he said. "That's how bodies are usually shipped, isn't it?"

"In a pine box," Ocean repeated slowly. "A great big pine box."

Slowly the harried despair, the indecision that was so new in Danny Ocean drained from him, and back into the straight, wiry body flowed some of the vitality, the self-assurance, he had always worn proudly, as a badge.

"I got it," he said softly, intently. "It ain't gonna be easy, but it can be done. And we gotta do it."

Sam Harmon sighed. He knew instantly what Danny meant; this new plan that the Scotch whisky had triggered in Danny Ocean's agile brain. "Even if we could do it," he protested, "even if we could get into that mortuary and pack that box with the money, what about Duke Santos, Danny?"

"You leave Duke Santos to me," Ocean said grimly. "You think I'm scared of a slob like Santos and his organization? Ain't Spyros Acebos

got an organization, too? That dough belongs to *us,* not Duke Santos. I'm gonna get it outta Vegas now, before anything else goes wrong. I'm gonna make this work. It's *gotta* work!"

He did not say it aloud, but Sam Harmon could almost hear the rest of it: *I, Danny Ocean, say so.*

3

The grisly thing was done early on the morning of January 2. The mortuary where Tony Bergdorf's body lay in a pine box, ready for shipment to San Francisco, was invaded by four men, Danny, Sam, Jimmy, and Josh Howard. Sam went along because he was committed to go: if the trail led to such desecrations and worse, he still was committed to go the whole route with Danny. When he had turned back from the foot of the stairs in Spyros Acebos' playroom he had damned himself and doomed himself.

Jimmy was along because the lieutenant felt responsible in a way he could not fully analyze himself for Duke Santos' calamitous interference. He had been given a break by Santos and it was as if to reject this break, as much as anything, that Jimmy Foster agreed to accompany the others on their macabre mission. Josh was there because they needed his disposal truck to move the money from the cave on the bank of the ravine back into Las Vegas.

Not all the way into the city, though, because the mortuary lay on the outskirts of town, part of a cemetery, but still dangerously close to the city that still had all its law-enforcement agencies alerted. It was a hazardous operation and one that violated most of the precautions laid down in the original plan. Josh Howard's truck had to depart from its early-morning routine by leaving its regular route on the return trip to the mortuary. There were four men in the cab of Howard's truck, not one, and it was only chance that let them pass unchallenged through the road blocks that still were set up on the highways in and out of the city.

Getting into the mortuary itself was easy for men whose military training had taught them to get into places with a minimum of commotion when necessary. Tony's was the only body in the rear room of the establishment and the rough shipping coffin was not nailed shut. It was Danny himself who removed the body while Josh Howard clenched his hands to keep from shouting and Jimmy Foster repressed his inner sickness and Sam Harmon looked on stonily.

"Lemme have the dough," Danny ordered. "Don't just stand around feelin' sorry for Tony—he ain't sufferin', f'crissake."

They gave him the five big sacks of money and somehow Danny packed it in such a way that when Tony was put back he lay in no

perceptibly different position than he had before. Ocean scrutinized his handiwork carefully by flashlight and nodded, satisfied.

"Let's blow outta here," he said, and they left.

There were several questions that Foster wanted to ask but somehow dared not. What if Tony's widow changed her mind and had services held for her husband, with the coffin opened, before the body was shipped out? But, the lieutenant reasoned, Tony was supposed to know nobody in Las Vegas so there was little chance of that.

How was Danny Ocean going to get the money out of the box in San Francisco? Was his next step grave robbing?

And, most of all, what about Duke Santos when he discovered he had been outwitted? Did Danny really think Spyros Acebos could cope with Duke Santos' organization?

Foster had little fear for his own immediate safety so far as Duke was concerned. Whatever happened, Santos would hesitate to harm Natalie Restes' darling boy; Duke wanted to marry Natalie. Of course at some future date there could be a tragic accident, but that would be after Santos was Natalie's husband, if it happened at all: Duke would not be so dilatory with Danny Ocean's retribution.

Sam asked no questions, made no guesses. Sam Harmon jostled along in the cab of the garbage truck, his mind curiously numb. Nothing mattered: nothing ever would matter again. If he wondered about anything it was the dim question of whether Bea was waiting in Los Angeles for her wonderful husband to walk into her little apartment with all those Texas oil-land millions.

So they came back to the city and dropped off the truck, one by one, and circulated among the people still up and about in this city that never slept. Back at his hotel room, Danny Ocean scrapped more of his own rules and made two phone calls, one to Roger Corneal and the other to Vince Massler.

"I want you on that train that carries Tony to Frisco," he told Corneal. "I may be with you, maybe not, but I want you on that train. You understand?"

"Sure," Corneal said. "I'll get down to the station right away."

That was the way Danny wanted it. No questions; just take the order and follow it.

"You know where they got Tony's body," he told Vince Massler. "I want you to get out there first thing in the mornin', eight o clock, and keep an eye on that box. Soon as it leaves the mortuary, you phone me here."

"Sure, Danny," Massler said. "But what's goin' on? I thought you said—"

"Never mind what I said," Ocean broke in. "There's been some changes. You just get out there and do like I told you."

"But, Sarge—"

Ocean hung up. He looked at the almost empty Scotch bottle and shook his head. Not now. From now until he got that dough out of the coffin somehow (make Tony's wife just get it planted quick: she hated his guts anyway) he couldn't have any more drinks. They were beginning to be needed too much. That was bad: that had never happened before. Time to shut himself off.

Well, maybe one. The operation at the undertaking joint had gone off so smooth it called for a celebration, didn't it?

He was drunk when Sam Harmon called at his room in the morning, not drunk as Danny Ocean always had gotten stoned, always able to talk and walk and reason, but blurry-eyed, loose-mouthed drunk. Room service had provided another bottle and there had been no lift, nothing but sodden despair, in that jug.

It was all Bea's fault, damn her. If she had stuck with him, if she'd just taken his word for things this once, everything would have gone off perfect. Tony Bergdorf wouldn't have crapped out, there wouldn't have been any Duke Santos in the picture at all, the dough would be lying safe in the cave, and everything would be proceeding according to plan.

But she had walked out on him and with her she had taken all his luck, all Danny Ocean's fabulous luck.

He raised his head and looked blearily at Sam. Another guy that had double-crossed him. It always had been that Sam could bring him luck whenever he needed it, from a penny-pitching deal to a big table-stakes game and now, when he needed Sam the most, the guy had loused out on him. Somehow he had thrown all that wonderful luck down the shit house, just because he was sore about him, Danny, getting him into this. Even for a million clams, old Boy Scout Harmon couldn't stand still for a deal like this, the biggest one anybody ever pulled.

To hell with them all. When he got the dough in San Francisco he'd see who crossed who. Bea, Sam, Jimmy, all of them—they could all go to hell. He'd look out for his only friend, Danny Ocean.

"I'd better get you some coffee, boy," Harmon was saying.

"Don't need coffee. 'Nother drink."

Sam's hand reached the bottle just ahead of Danny's and took it out of reach. "No more right now, kid," the pianist said easily. "You're going to need your head, Danny. Let me help you into a cold shower

and then we'll have some coffee and some breakfast, maybe."

Danny Ocean cursed his friend, tried to get up, and fell back on the bed. Sam stood looking down on this little man who had meant so much to him for so long. Not much left to Danny Ocean now. Not much left to either of them.

There was a knock, and Harmon let in Jimmy Foster. Natalie Restes' son looked at Ocean's rumpled, unshaven, snoring body and winced.

"He said yesterday he was afraid he was cracking up," he murmured.

"I know." Sam nodded. "Something's happened to him, Lieutenant. Something bad. I—if it wouldn't sound so cornball I'd almost say that Danny Ocean's evilness has caught up with him."

"Evil? Danny?"

Harmon nodded solemnly. "Oh, yes, he's always been. Lovable, charming, clever—but evil, Jimmy. Maybe you're like me: I knew what Danny really was but I loved the guy in spite of it. So now here I am, fastened to him."

He grated a hard laugh. "Sam Harmon, boy preacher," he said. "C'mon, let's see if we can get him under the shower and get some food in him."

They dragged Danny into the bathroom and doused his thin, wiry frame with cold water until he spluttered and swore and fought to get away. They had some coffee sent up and although Ocean insisted on lacing his with liquor, it seemed that the drunken man did manage to get hold of himself to some extent; his speech cleared a little and he was finally able to dress.

"Anything from Massler? Has Corneal called?"

They shook their heads.

"It's gonna be okay," Danny said. "You wait and see. Okay, so we got in a bind, but I can get us outta it. It's time we got a break, after the lousy luck with Tony—"

The telephone jangled and Ocean lurched at it, seized it, cried into it. "Yeah, yeah?"

He listened, and the others watched the lines in his face grow deeper. "You gave me till one o'clock, didn't you?" he said finally. "It's—it's nowhere near one."

He listened again, and his mouth twisted into a snarl. "I don't take that crap from you, Santos," he cried. "Who you think you're talkin' to, givin' *me* a warnin'?"

The other two men in the room heard the click of a disconnection. Ocean sat on the bed, looking down at the dead phone, cursing dully, incoherently. Sam finally took the telephone from him and replaced it

in its cradle.

"What time's it?" Danny demanded.

"Quarter to ten," Jimmy Foster said. "Do you think we'd better go out to the mortuary or—or do *something?"*

"It'll be all right," Ocean muttered. "We sit tight till Corneal or Massler calls. It'll be okay. My luck's in again—I can feel it."

So they waited. The minutes seemed to crawl past but when Danny asked the time again it was past eleven, less than two hours until the time Duke Santos was due, and there had been no word from Roger Corneal at the railroad station or Vince Massler at the mortuary. The sweat stood out greasily on Danny's forehead and his hand went up to pull at his chin or wipe his mouth, time after time.

When the telephone rang again, finally, Danny Ocean looked at it for a moment, letting it jangle twice. He licked his lips. "Now we move," he said. "That's Corneal or Vincerino. They're takin' that ole pine box outta Vegas. Here goes our ten million bucks, right down the line to Frisco. Like I said. Like I figured. Just like I planned it, see?"

He swayed and reached for the telephone. He picked it up, fumbled it for a moment, and then placed the receiver to his ear.

It was Vince Massler. Danny held the receiver so loosely that both Foster and Harmon could hear his anguished voice.

"Danny, Danny!" the one-time stunt man cried. "It's all loused up. It went all wrong, Sarge. I waited and waited like you said, but they didn't bring out the box. And just now—just now Tony's wife came out and—and I ast her. I didn't know what to do so I just went up to her and ast her. Oh, Danny!"

Ocean frowned owlishly. "So what'd she say?" he finally managed. "What happened?"

"She changed her mind, Danny! She said it was cheaper this way and Tony didn't leave no dough hardly and she had to watch every nickel. He didn't have no friends that would come to a funeral, anyway, she said. So why ship him to Frisco? She—Jesus, Danny, I couldn't help it! I didn't know what was happenin'."

There was a moment of stricken silence and then Vince Massler wailed:

"She had him cremated, Danny! They just now got through burnin' him up, coffin and all!"

4

They caught up with Danny Ocean in a flea-bag hotel down by the railroad tracks in a Connecticut mill town. Sam Harmon was with him in the frowsty little bedroom with the drawn, cracked shade, the

sagging bed, the threadbare carpet, the bottle of tokay wine on the bureau.

Sam stood up from the side of the bed as the door opened and the three men came in. Danny sat slumped in the room's only chair, his bristled chin on his chest, his dirty shirt open to his belt, his legs in their soiled, baggy pants thrust out in front of him.

"We've been expecting you," Sam said quietly. "Maybe we're glad you found us. I guess were the last, huh, Mushy?"

Mushy O'Conners nodded miserably. "Yeah," he said. "I guess maybe you heard about the others. The lieutenant and that car that turned over on him. Rog and Vince; they got it together out in Phoenix. Josh, they found him in an alley in Detroit, under the snow."

His battered face twisted with his inner pain. "It wasn't all me, Sam," he said. "Santos' crowd made a deal with Mr. Acebos so some of Duke's guys got a coupla the boys. It was a race, sort of, a kind of Goddam race. And I hadda be the one that won it, gettin' to the sarge, to Danny."

"C'mon, Mushy," one of the other men said. "We gonna yack all night or are we gonna get this done and blow outta here?"

"I hope you unnerstand, Sam," Mushy said anxiously. "It ain't nothin' personal, even with all that dough gone up in smoke, but I'm workin' for Mr. Acebos and—well, you know. I just hope you unnerstand. I hope Danny unnerstands."

Sam Harmon glanced down at the man in the chair. "It won't hurt him, Mushy," he said. "He's been past feeling anything for a long time."

"A Goddam wino," one of the other men said with a chuckle. "I thought this Danny Ocean was somethin' and he turns out to be a stinkin' wino."

Mushy turned on his confrere. "You didn't know him," he cried. "There was a time when there wasn't *nobody* like Danny Ocean. He had everything."

"Well, he's sure got nothin' now." The man beside Mushy laughed. "So let's give him what's comin' to him, compliments of Spyros Acebos."

At the last moment Sam Harmon stepped in front of the sodden man in the chair but of course it made no difference except that Danny Ocean lived a second or two longer than Sam. The guns with their silencers spanged viciously and Mushy O'Conners sobbed and turned and blundered out of the room and down the narrow, smelly hall.

It was tough on a guy to do his job right sometimes but Danny well, Danny had run out of luck and for him life wouldn't be worth living

after that, anyway. He was better off dead. Yeah, one way to look at it was that Mushy had done him a favor, like.